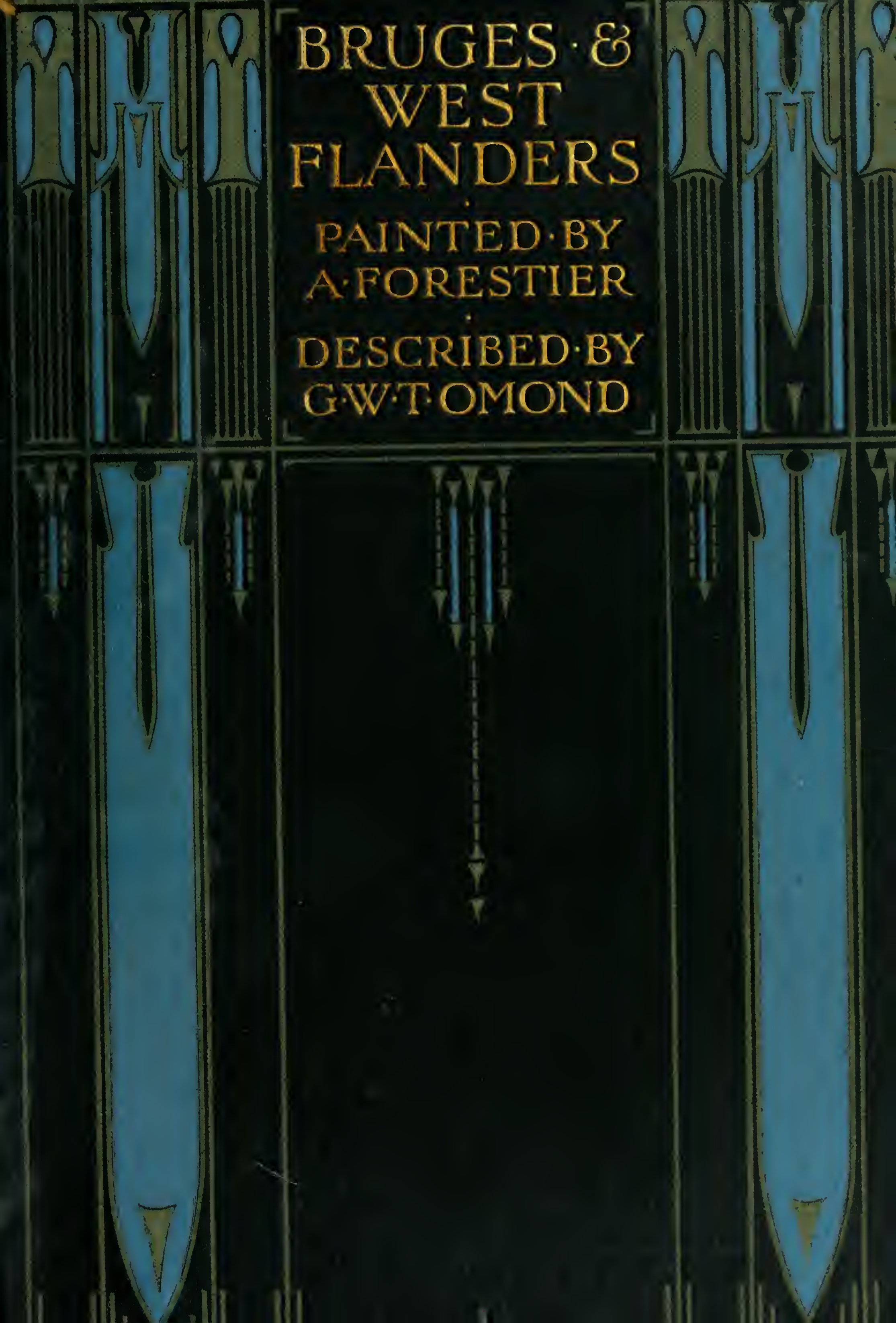

BRUGES & WEST FLANDERS
PAINTED BY A·FORESTIER
DESCRIBED BY G·W·T·OMOND

To
Joseph and Dorothea Emerson,
Dec. 25th, 1906,
with the love and good wishes of
Wm. D. and Mary C. Alexander.

BRUGES AND WEST FLANDERS

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A FLEMISH COUNTRY GIRL



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Preface

There is no part of Europe more wanting in what is known as 'scenery' than Flanders; and those who journey there must spend most of their time in the old towns which are still so strangely mediæval in their aspect, or in country places which are worth seeing only because of their connection with some event in history—Nature has done so little for them. Thus the interest and the attraction of Flanders and the Flemish towns are chiefly historical. But it would be impossible to compress the history of such places as Bruges, Ypres, Furnes, or Nieuport within the limits of a few pages, except at the cost of loading them with a mass of dry facts. Accordingly the plan adopted in preparing the letterpress which accompanies Mr. Forestier's drawings has been to select a few leading incidents, and give these at some length.

The Flemish School of Painting and Architecture

has been so well and frequently described that it would have been mere affectation to make more than a few passing allusions to that topic.

Some space has, however, been devoted to an account of the recent development of the Flemish littoral, which has been so remarkable during the last quarter of a century.

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BRUGES AND WEST FLANDERS

CHAPTER I

THE MARKET-PLACE AND BELFRY—EARLY HISTORY OF BRUGES

Every visitor to 'the quaint old Flemish city' goes first to the Market-Place. On Saturday mornings the wide space beneath the mighty Belfry is full of stalls, with white canvas awnings, and heaped up with a curious assortment of goods. Clothing of every description, sabots and leathern shoes and boots, huge earthenware jars, pots and pans, kettles, cups and saucers, baskets, tawdry-coloured prints—chiefly of a religious character—lamps and candlesticks, the cheaper kinds of Flemish pottery, knives and forks, carpenters' tools, and such small articles as reels of thread, hatpins, tape, and even bottles of coarse scent, are piled on the stalls or spread out on the rough stones wherever there is a vacant space. Round the stalls, in the narrow

spaces between them, the people move about, talking, laughing, and bargaining. Their native Flemish is the tongue they use amongst themselves; but many of them speak what passes for French at Bruges, or even a few words of broken English, if some unwary stranger from across the Channel is rash enough to venture on doing business with these sharp-witted, plausible folk.

At first sight this Market-Place, so famed in song, is a disappointment. The north side is occupied by a row of seventeenth-century houses turned into shops and third-rate cafés. On the east is a modern post-office, dirty and badly ventilated, and some half-finished Government buildings. On the west are two houses which were once of some note—the Cranenburg, from the windows of which, in olden times, the Counts of Flanders, with the lords and ladies of their Court, used to watch the tournaments and pageants for which Bruges was celebrated, and in which Maximilian was imprisoned by the burghers in 1488; and the Hôtel de Bouchoute, a narrow, square building of dark red brick, with a gilded lion over the doorway. But the Cranenburg, once the 'most magnificent private residence in the Market-Place,' many years ago lost every trace of

its original splendour, and is now an unattractive hostelry, the headquarters of a smoking club; while the Hôtel de Bouchoute, turned into a clothier's shop, has little to distinguish it from its commonplace neighbours. Nevertheless,

> 'In the Market-Place of Bruges stands the Belfry old and brown;
> Thrice consumed and thrice rebuilded, still it watches o'er the town.'

It redeems the Market-Place from mediocrity. How long ago the first belfry tower of Bruges was built is unknown, but this at least is certain, that in the year 1280 a fire, in which the ancient archives of the town perished, destroyed the greater part of an old belfry, which some suppose may have been erected in the ninth century. On two subsequent occasions, in the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, the present Belfry, erected on the ruins of the former structure, was damaged by fire; and now it stands on the south side of the Market-Place, rising 350 feet above the Halles, a massive building of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, solemn, weather-beaten, and majestic. 'For six hundred years,' it has been said, 'this Belfry has watched over the city of Bruges. It has beheld her triumphs and her failures, her glory and her shame,

her prosperity and her gradual decay, and, in spite of so many vicissitudes, it is still standing to bear witness to the genius of our forefathers, to awaken memories of old times and admiration for one of the most splendid monuments of civic architecture which the Middle Ages has produced.'*

In olden times watchmen were always on duty on the Belfry to give warning if enemies approached or fire broke out in any part of the town, a constant source of danger when most of the houses were built of wood. Even in these more prosaic days the custom of keeping watch and ward unceasingly is still maintained, and if there is a fire, the alarum-bell clangs over the city. All day, from year's end to year's end, the chimes ring every quarter of an hour; and all night, too, during the wildest storms of winter, when the wind shrieks round the tower; and in summer, when the old town lies slumbering in the moonlight.

From the top of the Belfry one looks down on

* Gilliat-Smith, *The Story of Bruges*, p. 169 (Dent and Co., London, 1901). Mr. Gilliat-Smith's book is a picturesque account of Bruges in the Middle Ages. Of the English works relating to Bruges, there is nothing better than Mr. Wilfrid Robinson's *Bruges, an Historical Sketch*, a short and clear history, coming down to modern times (Louis de Plancke, Bruges, 1899).



BRUGES

A corner of the Market on the Grand' Place.



what is practically a mediæval city. The Market-Place seems to lose its modern aspect when seen from above; and all round there is nothing visible but houses with high-pointed gables and red roofs, intersected by canals, and streets so narrow that they appear to be mere lanes. Above these rise, sometimes from trees and gardens, churches, convents, venerable buildings, the lofty spire of Notre Dame, the tower of St. Sauveur, the turrets of the Gruthuise, the Hospital of St. John, famous for its paintings by Memlinc, the Church of Ste. Elizabeth in the grove of the Béguinage, the pinnacles of the Palais du Franc, the steep roof of the Hôtel de Ville, the dome of the Couvent des Dames Anglaises, and beyond that to the east the slender tower which rises above the Guildhouse of the Archers of St. Sebastian. The walls which guarded Bruges in troublous times have disappeared, though five of the old gateways remain; but the town is still contained within the limits which it had reached at the close of the thirteenth century.

Behind the large square of the Halles, from which the Belfry rises, is the Rue du Vieux Bourg, the street of the Ouden Burg, or old fort; and to this street the student of history must first go if he wishes to understand what tradition, more or

less authentic, has to say about the earliest phases in the strange, eventful past of Bruges. The wide plain of Flanders, the northern portion of the country which we now call Belgium, was in ancient times a dreary fenland, the haunt of wild beasts and savage men; thick, impenetrable forests, tracts of barren sand, sodden marshes, covered it; and sluggish streams, some whose waters never found their way to the sea, ran through it. One of these rivulets, called the Roya, was crossed by a bridge, to defend which, according to early tradition, a fort, or 'burg,' was erected in the fourth century. This fort stood on an islet formed by the meeting of the Roya with another stream, called the Boterbeke, and a moat which joined the two. We may suppose that near the fort, which was probably a small building of rough stones, or perhaps merely a wooden stockade, a few huts were put up by people who came there for protection, and as time went on the settlement increased. 'John of Ypres, Abbot of St. Bertin,' says Mr. Robinson, 'who wrote in the fourteenth century, describes how Bruges was born and christened: "Very soon pedlars began to settle down under the walls of the fort to supply the wants of its inmates. Next came merchants, with



BELL-RINGER PLAYING A CHIME



their valuable wares. Innkeepers followed, who began to build houses, where those who could not find lodging in the fort found food and shelter. Those who thus turned away from the fort would say, 'Let us go to the bridge.' And when the houses near the bridge became so numerous as to form a town, it kept as its proper name the Flemish word *Brugge*."'

The small island on which this primitive township stood was bounded on the south and east by the Roya, on the north by the Boterbeke, and on the west by the moat joining these two streams. The Roya still flows along between the site of the old burg and an avenue of lime-trees called the Dyver till it reaches the end of the Quai du Rosaire, when it turns to the north. A short distance beyond this point it is vaulted over, and runs on beneath the streets and houses of the town. The Rue du Vieux Bourg is built over the course of the Boterbeke, which now runs under it and under the Belfry (erected on foundations sunk deep into the bed of the stream), until it joins the subterranean channel of the Roya at the south-east corner of the Market-Place. The moat which joined these two streams and guarded the west side of the island was filled up long ago, and its

bed is now covered by the Rue Neuve, which connects the Rue du Vieux Bourg with the Dyver.

Thus the boundaries of early Bruges can easily be traced; but nothing remains of the ancient buildings, though we read of a warehouse, booths, and a prison, besides the dwelling-houses of the townsfolk. The elements, at least, of civic life were there; and tradition says that in or near the village, for it was nothing more, some altars of the Christian faith were set up during the seventh and eighth centuries. Trade, too, soon began to flourish, and grew rapidly as the population of the place increased. The Roya, flowing eastwards, fell into the Zwijn, an arm of the sea, which then ran up close to the town, and on which stood Damme, now a small inland village, but once a busy port crowded with shipping. The commercial life of Bruges depended on the Zwijn; and that much business was done before the close of the ninth century is shown by the fact that Bruges had then a coinage of its own.* It was from such small beginnings that this famous 'Venice of the North' arose.

* Gilliodts van Severen, *Bruges Ancienne et Moderne*, pp. 7, 8, 9.



BRUGES

Porte d'Ostende.



BALDWIN BRAS-DE-FER—
THE PLACE DU BOURG—MURDER OF
CHARLES THE GOOD

CHAPTER II

BALDWIN BRAS-DE-FER—THE PLACE DU BOURG—MURDER OF CHARLES THE GOOD

TOWARDS the end of the ninth and at the beginning of the tenth century great changes took place on the banks of the Roya, and the foundations of Bruges as we know it now were laid. Just as in the memorable years 1814 and 1815 the empire of Napoleon fell into fragments, and princes and statesmen hastened to readjust the map of Europe in their own interests, so in the ninth century the empire of Charlemagne was crumbling away; and in the scramble for the spoils, the Normans carried fire and sword into Flanders. Charles the Bald, King of the Franks, at this crisis called to his aid the strong arm of Baldwin, a Flemish chief of whose ancestry we know little, but who soon became famous as Baldwin Bras-de-Fer—Baldwin of the Iron Arm, so called because, in peace or war, he was never seen without his coat of mail. This grim warrior

had fallen in love with the daughter of Charles the Bald, Judith, who had been already twice married, first to the Saxon King Ethelwulf (after the death of his first wife Osberga, mother of Alfred the Great) and secondly to Ethelbald, on whose death she left England and went to live at Senlis. Baldwin persuaded the Princess to run away with him; and they were married without the knowledge of her father, to escape whose vengeance the culprits fled to Rome. Pope Nicholas I. brought about a reconciliation; and Charles not only pardoned his son-in-law, but appointed him ruler of Flanders under the title of Marquis, which was afterwards changed into that of Count. It is to the steel-clad Baldwin Bras-de-Fer that the Counts of Flanders trace the origin of their title; and he was, moreover, the real founder of that Bruges which rose to such glory in the Middle Ages, and is still, though fallen from its high estate, the picturesque capital of West Flanders, whither artists flock to wander about amidst the canals and bridges, the dismantled ramparts, the narrow streets with their curious houses, and the old buildings which bear such eloquent testimony to the ruin which long ago overtook what was once an opulent and powerful city.

When the wrath of his father-in-law had been appeased, Baldwin, now responsible for the defence of Flanders, came to Bruges with his wife, and there established his Court. But the old burg, it seems, was not thought capable of holding out against the Normans, who could easily land on the banks of the Zwijn; and Baldwin, therefore, set about building a new stronghold on the east side of the old burg, and close to it. It was surrounded partly by the main stream of the Roya, and partly by backwaters flowing from it. Here he built a fortress for himself and his household, a church dedicated to St. Donatian, a prison, and a 'ghiselhuis,' or house for the safe keeping of hostages. The whole was enclosed by walls, built close to the edge of the surrounding waters.

The Roya is now vaulted over where it ran along the west side of Baldwin's stronghold, separating it from the original burg, and the watercourses which defended it on the north and east are filled up; but the stream on the south still remains in the shape of the canal which skirts the Quai des Marbriers, from which a bridge leads by a narrow lane, called the Rue de l'Âne Aveugle, under an arch of gilded stonework, into the open space now known as the Place du Bourg. Here

we are at the very heart of Bruges, on the ground where Baldwin's stronghold stood, with its four gates and drawbridges, and the high walls frowning above the homes of the townsmen clustering round them. The aspect of the place is completely changed since those early days. A grove of chestnut-trees covers the site of the Church of St. Donatian; not a stone remains of Bras-de-Fer's rude palace; and instead of the prison and the hostage-house, there are the Hôtel de Ville, now more than five hundred years old, from whose windows the Counts of Flanders swore obedience to the statutes and privileges of the town, the Palais de Justice, and the dark crypt beneath the chapel which shelters the mysterious Relic of the Holy Blood.

In summer it is a warm, quiet, pleasant spot. Under the shade of the trees, near the statue of Van Eyck, women selling flowers sit beside rows of geraniums, roses, lilies, pansies, which give a touch of bright colour to the scene. Artists from all parts of Europe set up their easels and paint. Young girls are gravely busy with their water-colours. Black-robed nuns and bare-footed Carmelites pass silently along. Perhaps some traveller from America opens his guide-book to study the



BRUGES

Rue de l'Âne Aveugle (showing end of Town Hall and Bridge connecting it with Palais de Justice).



map of a city which had risen to greatness long before Columbus crossed the seas. A few English people hurry across, and pass under the archway of the Rue de l'Âne Aveugle on the way to their tennis-ground beyond the Porte de Gand. The sunshine glitters on the gilded façade of the Palais de Justice, and lights up the statues in their niches on the front of the Hôtel de Ville. There is no traffic, no noise. Everything is still and peaceful. The chimes, ever and anon ringing out from the huge Belfry, which rises high above the housetops to the west, alone break the silence.

This is Bruges sleeping peacefully in old age, lulled to rest by the sound of its own carillon. But it is easy, standing there, to recall the past, and to fancy the scenes which took place from time to time throughout the long period of foreign danger and internal strife. We can imagine the Bourg, now so peaceful, full of armed men, rushing to the Church of St. Donatian on the morning when Charles the Good was slain; how, in later times, the turbulent burghers, fiery partisans of rival factions, Clauwerts shouting for the Flemish Lion, and Leliarts marshalled under the Lily of France, raged and threatened; how the stones were splashed with blood on the day of the Bruges

Matins, when so many Frenchmen perished; or what shouts were raised when the Flemish host came back victorious from the Battle of the Golden Spurs.

Though every part of Bruges—not only the Bourg, but the great Market-Place, and the whole maze of streets and lanes and canals of which it consists—has a story of its own, some of these stories stand out by themselves; and amongst these one of the most dramatic is the story of the death of Charles the Good.

More than two hundred and fifty years had passed away since the coming of Baldwin Bras-de-Fer; Bruges had spread far beyond the walls of the Bourg; and Charles, who had succeeded his cousin Baldwin VII., was Count of Flanders. He was called 'the Good' because of his just rule and simple life, and still more, perhaps, because he clothed and fed the poor—not only in Bruges, but throughout all Flanders. The common people loved him, but his charities gave offence to the rich. He had, moreover, incurred the special enmity of the Erembalds, a powerful family, who, though not of noble origin themselves, were connected by marriage with many noble houses. They had supported his claim to the

throne of Flanders, which had been disputed, and he had rewarded their services by heaping favours on them. But, after a time, they began to oppose the methods of government which Charles applied to Flanders. They resented most of all one of his decrees which made it unlawful for persons not in his service to carry arms in time of peace. This decree, which was pronounced in order to prevent the daily scenes of violence which Charles abhorred, was declared by the Erembalds to be an interference with Flemish liberty. It did not affect them personally, for they held office under the Count; but they none the less opposed it vehemently.

While Charles was thus on bad terms with the Erembalds, a deadly feud existed between them and the Straetens, another notable family, which grew to such a height that the rival clans made open war upon each other, pillaging, burning, and slaying after the manner of these times. Charles called the leaders of both sides before him, and made them swear to keep the peace; but when he was at Ypres in the autumn of 1126, a complaint was laid before him that Bertulf, head of the Erembalds, who was also Provost of St. Donatian's, had sent one of his nephews, Burchard

by name, on a raid into the lands of the Straetens, whose cattle he had carried off. On hearing of this outrage, Charles gave orders that Burchard's house should be pulled down, and that he should compensate the Straetens for their losses. The Erembalds were powerless to resist this order, and Burchard's house was razed to the ground.

It has been said that this was only the beginning of strong measures which Charles was about to take against the Erembalds; but there is no certainty as to what his intentions really were. He then lived in the Loove, a mansion which he had built in the Bourg at Bruges, on the site now occupied by the Palais de Justice; and there, on his return from Ypres, he had a meeting with some of the Erembalds, who had been sent to plead on behalf of Burchard. As to what took place at this interview there is some doubt. According to one account, Charles drank wine with the delegates, and granted a free pardon to Burchard, on condition that he kept the peace. According to another account, his demeanour was so unbending that the Erembalds left his presence full of angry suspicions, which they communicated to their friends. Whatever may have happened, they were bent on mischief. Burchard was sent for, and a secret



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Quai du Rosaire.



consultation was held, after which Burchard and a chosen few assembled in a house on the Bourg and arranged their plans. This was on the night of March 1, 1127.

At break of day next morning a cold, heavy mist hung low over Bruges, and in the Bourg everything was shrouded in darkness. But already some poor men were waiting in the courtyard of the Loove, to whom Charles gave alms on his way to early Mass in the Church of St. Donatian. Then he went along a private passage which led into the church, and knelt in prayer before the Lady Altar. It was his custom to give help to the needy when in church, and he had just put some money into the hands of a poor woman, when suddenly she called out: 'Beware, Sir Count!' He turned quickly round, and there, sword in hand, was Burchard, who had stolen up the dim aisle to where Charles was kneeling. The next moment Burchard struck, and Charles fell dead upon the steps of the altar.

Then followed a scene of wild confusion. The woman ran out into the Bourg, calling loudly that the Count was slain. In the midst of the uproar some of the royal household fled in terror, while others who entered the church were butchered by

the Erembalds, who next attacked the Loove, and, having pillaged it, rushed over Bruges, slaughtering without mercy all who dared to oppose them.

After some time one of the Count's servants ventured to cover the dead body with a winding-sheet, and to surround it with lighted tapers ; and there it remained lying on the pavement, until at last the Erembalds, who were afraid to bury it in Bruges lest the sight of the tomb of Charles the Good should one day rouse the townsmen to avenge his death, sent a message to Ghent, begging the Abbot of St. Peter's to take it away and bury it in his own church. The Abbot came to Bruges, and before dawn the body of the murdered Count was being stealthily carried along the aisles of St. Donatian's, when a great crowd rushed in, declaring that the bones of Charles must be allowed to rest in peace at Bruges. The arches rang with cries, chairs were overturned, stools and candlesticks were thrown about, as the people, pressing and struggling round the Abbot and his servants, told Bertulf, with many an oath, that he must yield to their wishes. At last the Provost submitted, and on the morrow, just two days after the murder, the body of Charles was buried before

the Lady Altar, on the very spot, it is said, where the statue of Van Eyck now stands under the trees in the Bourg.

The triumph of the Erembalds was short, for the death of Charles the Good was terribly avenged by his friends, who came to Bruges at the head of a large force. A fierce struggle took place at the Rue de l'Âne Aveugle, where many were slain. The Erembalds were driven into the Bourg, the gates of which they shut; but an entrance was forced, and, after desperate fighting, some thirty of them, all who remained alive, were compelled to take refuge, first in the nave and then in the tower of the Church of St. Donatian, where, defending themselves with the courage of despair, they made a last stand, until, worn out by fatigue and hunger, they surrendered and came down. Bertulf the Provost, Burchard, and a few of the other ringleaders had fled some days before, and so escaped, for a time at least, the fate of their companions, who, having been imprisoned in a dungeon, were taken to the top of the church tower and flung down one by one on to the stones of the Bourg. 'Their bodies,' says Mr. Gilliat-Smith, 'were thrown into a marsh beyond the village of St. André, and for years afterwards no man after

nightfall would willingly pass that way.' In the Church of St. Sauveur there is a costly shrine containing what are said to be the bones of Charles the Good, taken from their first resting-place, at which twice every year a festival is held in commemoration of his virtues.

THE BÉGUINAGE—CHURCHES—THE RELIC OF THE HOLY BLOOD

4

CHAPTER III

THE BÉGUINAGE—CHURCHES—THE RELIC OF THE HOLY BLOOD

Bruges is one of the most Catholic towns in Catholic Flanders. Convents and religious houses of all sorts have always flourished there, and at present there are no less than forty-five of these establishments. Probably one of the most interesting to English people is the Couvent des Dames Anglaises, which was founded in 1629 by the English Augustinian Nuns of Ste. Monica's Convent at Louvain. Its chapel, with a fine dome of the eighteenth century, contains a beautiful altar built of marbles brought from Egypt, Greece, and Persia; and amongst its possessions is the rosary of Catherine of Braganza (Queen of Charles II. of England), who died at Bruges.

And then there is the Béguinage. There are Béguinages at Amsterdam and Breda, but with this exception of Holland, Belgium is now the only country in Europe where these societies, the

origin of whose name is uncertain, are to be found. They consist of spinsters or widows, who, though bound by a few conventual oaths during their connection with the society, may return to the world. On entering each sister pays a sum of money to the general funds, and at first lives for a time along with other novices. At the end of this term of probation they are at liberty to occupy one of the small dwellings within the precincts of the Béguinage, and keep house for themselves. They spend their time in sewing, making lace, educating poor children, visiting the sick, or any form of good works for which they may have a taste. They are under a Mother Superior, the 'Grande Dame,' appointed by the Bishop of the diocese, and must attend the services in the church of their Béguinage. Thus the Béguine, living generally in a house of her own, and free to re-enter the world, occupies a different position from the nuns of the better-known Orders, though so long as she remains a member of her society she is bound by the vows of chastity and obedience to her ecclesiastical superiors.

The Béguinage at Bruges, founded in the thirteenth century, is situated near the Minnewater, or Lac d'Amour, which every visitor is taken to



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The Béguinage.



see. This sheet of placid water, bordered by trees, which was a harbour in the busy times, is one of the prettiest bits of Bruges; and they say that if you go there at midnight, and stand upon the bridge which crosses it on the south, any wish which you may form will certainly come to pass. It is better to go alone, for strict silence is necessary to insure the working of this charm. A bridge over the water which runs from the Lac d'Amour leads through a gateway into the Béguinage, where a circle of small houses—whitewashed, with stepped gables, and green woodwork on the windows—surrounds a lawn planted with tall trees. There is a view of the spire of Notre Dame beyond the roofs, a favourite subject for the painters who come here in numbers on summer afternoons. The Church of Ste. Elizabeth, an unpretentious building, stands on one side of the lawn; and within it, many times a day, the Sisters may be seen on their knees repeating the Offices of the Church. When the service is finished they rise, remove their white head-coverings, and return demurely to their quaint little homes.

Bruges has, needless to say, many churches, but nothing which can be compared to the magnificent Cathedral of Antwerp, to the imposing front of

Ste. Gudule at Brussels, or to the huge mass which forms such a conspicuous landmark for several leagues round Malines. Still, some of the churches are not without interest: the Cathedral of St. Sauveur, where the stalls of the Knights of the Order of the Golden Fleece, which was founded at Bruges, are to be seen in the choir, and over one of them the arms of Edward IV. of England; the curious little Church of Jerusalem, with its 'Holy Sepulchre,' an exact copy of the traditionary grave in Palestine—a dark vault, entered by a passage so low that one must crawl through it, and where a light burns before a figure which lies there wrapped in a linen cloth; and the Church of Notre Dame, which contains some treasures, such as a lovely white marble statue of the Virgin and Child, from the chisel of Michael Angelo; the tombs of Charles the Bold of Burgundy and his daughter—the 'Gentle Mary,' whose untimely death at Bruges in 1482, after a short married life, saved her from witnessing the misfortunes which clouded the last years of her husband, the Archduke Maximilian; and a portion of the Holy Cross, which came to Bruges in the fifteenth century. The story goes that a rich merchant, a Dutchman from Dordrecht, Schoutteeten by name, who lived at Bruges, was

travelling through Syria in the year 1380. One day, when journeying with a caravan, he saw a man hiding something in a wood, and, following him, discovered that it was a box, which he suspected might contain something valuable. Mijnheer Schoutteeten appropriated the box, and carried it home from Syria to Dordrecht, where a series of miracles began to occur of such a nature as to make it practically certain that the box (or some wood which it contained, for on this point the legend is vague) was a part of the true Cross! In course of time Schoutteeten died in the odour of sanctity, having on his death-bed expressed a wish that the wood which he had brought from the East should be given to the Church of Notre Dame at Bruges. His widow consoled herself by taking a second husband, who, Uutenhove by name, fulfilled the pious request of his predecessor, and thus another relic was added to the large collection which is preserved in the various churches and religious houses of Bruges. It was brought to Flanders in the year 1473, and must have been a source of considerable revenue to the Church since then.

The buildings of Notre Dame, with the well-known Gruthuise Mansion which adjoins them,

and the singularly graceful spire, higher than the Belfry tower, rising from the exquisite portico called 'Het Paradijs,' form a very beautiful group; but, with this exception, there is nothing remarkable about the churches of Bruges. One of them, however, has a peculiar interest—the Chapelle du Saint-Sang, which stands in the Place du Bourg in the corner next to the Hôtel de Ville. It is built in two stories. The lower, a dark, solemn chapel, like a crypt, was dedicated to St. Basil at an early period, and is one of the oldest buildings in Bruges. The greater part of the upper story does not date further back than the fifteenth century. But it is not the fabric itself, venerable though that is, but what it contains, that makes this place the Holy of Holies in the religious life of Bruges; for here, in a costly shrine of gold and silver adorned with precious stones, they guard the wonderful relic which was brought from Palestine in the time of the Crusaders by Thierry d'Alsace, Count of Flanders, and which is still worshipped by thousands of devout believers every year.

Thierry d'Alsace, the old chroniclers tell us, visited the Holy Land four times, and was the leader of the Flemish warriors who, roused by the eloquence of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, joined the

second Crusade in the summer of 1147. He had married Sybilla, sister of Baldwin, King of Jerusalem; and when the time came for his return to Europe, his brother-in-law and the Patriarch of Jerusalem resolved to reward his services by giving him a part of the most valuable relic which the Church in Palestine possessed, which was a small quantity of a red liquid, said to be blood and water, which, according to immemorial tradition, Joseph of Arimathæa had preserved after he had washed the dead body of Jesus.

The earlier history of this relic is unknown, and is as obscure as that of the other 'Relics of the Holy Blood' which are to be found in various places. But there can be no doubt whatever that in the twelfth century the Christians at Jerusalem believed that it had been in existence since the day of the Crucifixion. It was, therefore, presented to Thierry with great solemnity in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre during the Christmas festivals of 1148. The Patriarch, having displayed the vessel which contained it to the people, divided the contents into two portions, one of which he poured into a small vial, the mouth of which was carefully sealed up and secured with gold wire. This vessel was next enclosed in a crystal tube,

shut at the ends with golden stoppers, to which a chain of silver was attached. Then the Patriarch gave the tube to Baldwin, from whose hands Thierry, kneeling on the steps of the altar, received it with profound emotion.*

The Count, however, did not think his hands, which had shed so much human blood, worthy to convey the relic home; and he entrusted it to Leonius, chaplain of the Flemish Army, who hung it round his neck, and so carried it to Bruges, where he arrived in May, 1150, along with Thierry, who, mounted on a white horse led by two barefooted monks, and holding the relic in his hand, was conducted in state to the Bourg, where he deposited the precious object in the Chapel of St. Basil, which is commonly known as the Chapel of the Holy Blood.

After some time the relic was found to be dry, but, strange to say, it became liquid, we are told upon the authority of Pope Clement V., every Friday, 'usually at six o'clock.' This weekly miracle continued till about the year 1325. Since then it has never taken place except once, in 1388, when the vial containing the relic was being trans-

* Canon van Haecke, *Le Précieux Sang à Bruges* (fourth edition), pp. 95, 96.

ferred to a new crystal tube; and on this occasion William, Bishop of Ancona, was astonished to see the relic turning redder than usual, and some drops, as of newly-shed blood, flowing within the vial, which he was holding in his hand. Many notable persons who were present, one of them the Bishop of Lincoln, testified to this event!

Other miracles wrought through the agency of this relic are recorded. A child which had been born dead was taken to the shrine, and came to life after three days. A young girl who had suffered for twenty months from an issue of blood, and for whom the doctors could do nothing, was cured by the application of a piece of cloth which had been used to cover the relic. Another girl who had been paralyzed for a long time, being carried into the Chapel of St. Basil, was restored to complete strength the moment she kissed the crystal tube. In December, 1689, a fire broke out in the Bourg, and threatened to destroy the Hôtel de Ville; but a priest brought forth the tube containing the relic, and held it up before the flames, which were instantly extinguished. These and many other similar miracles, confirmed by the oath of witnesses and received by the Church at the present day as authentic, make the relic an

object of profound devotion to the people of Bruges and the peasants of the surrounding country, who go in crowds to bow before it twice every Friday, when it is exhibited for public worship.

It was nearly lost on several occasions in the days of almost constant war, and during the French Revolution it was concealed for some years in the house of a private citizen. The Chapel of St. Basil suffered from the disturbed condition of the country, and when Napoleon came to Bruges in 1810 it was such a complete wreck that the magistrates were on the point of sweeping it away altogether. But Napoleon saved it, declaring that when he looked on the ruins he fancied himself once more amongst the antiquities of Egypt, and that to destroy them would be a crime. Four years after the Battle of Waterloo the relic was brought out from its hiding-place, and in 1856 the chapel was restored from the designs of two English architects, William Brangwyn and Thomas Harper King.*

On the first Monday after the 2nd of May every year the town of Bruges is full of strangers, who have come to witness the celebrated 'Procession

* Gilliat-Smith, *The Story of Bruges*, p. 103.

of the Holy Blood,' which there is good reason to believe has taken place annually (except during the French Revolution) for the last 755 years.

Very early in the day a Mass is celebrated in the Upper Chapel of the Holy Blood, which is crowded to the doors. In the crypt, or lower chapel, where many people are kneeling before the sacred images, the gloom, the silence, the bent figures dimly seen in the faint yellow light of a few tapers, make up a weird scene all the morning till about nine o'clock, when the relic, in its 'châsse,' or tabernacle, is carried to the Cathedral of St. Sauveur, and placed on the high altar, while a pontifical Mass is celebrated by one of the Bishops. When that is done, the procession starts on its march along the chief thoroughfares of the town. The houses are decorated with flags, and candles burn in almost every window. Through the narrow streets, between crowds of people standing on the pavements or looking down from the windows, while the church bells ring and wreaths of incense fill the air, bands of music, squadrons of cavalry, crucifixes, shrines, images, the banners of the parishes and the guilds, heralds in their varied dresses, bareheaded pilgrims from England, France, and other countries, pages, maidens in white, bear-

ing palms, or crowns of thorn, or garlands, priests with relics, acolytes and chanting choristers, pass slowly along. The buffoonery of the Middle Ages, when giants, ballet-dancers, and mythological characters figured in the scene, has been abandoned; but Abraham and Isaac, King David and King Solomon, Joseph and the Virgin Mary, the Magi, and many saints and martyrs, walk in the long procession, which is closed by the Bishops and clergy accompanying the gorgeous shrine containing the small tube of something red like blood, before which all the people sink to the ground, and remain kneeling till it has passed.

The proceedings of the day end with a benediction at an altar erected in front of the Hôtel de Ville. The Bourg is filled from side to side with those who have taken part in the procession, and by thousands of spectators who have followed them from all parts of the town to witness the closing scene. The crowd gathers under the trees and along the sides of the square, the centre of which, occupied by the processionists, is a mass of colour, above which the standards and images which have been carried through the streets rise against the dark background of the Hôtel de Ville and the Chapel of the Holy Blood. The relic is taken out

of the châsse, and a priest, standing on the steps of the altar high above the crowd, holds it up to be worshipped. Everyone bows low, and then, in dead silence, the mysterious object is carried into the chapel, and with this the chief religious ceremony of the year at Bruges is brought to a close.

There are sights in Bruges that night, within a stone's-throw of the Chapel of the Holy Blood, which are worth seeing, they contrast so strangely with all this fervour of religion.

The curtain has fallen upon the drama of the day. The flags are furled and put aside. The vestments are in the sacristy. Shrines, canopies, censers, all the objects carried in the procession, have disappeared into the churches. The church doors are locked, and the images are left to stand all night without so much as one solitary worshipper kneeling before them. The Bourg is empty and dark, steeped in black shadows at the door of the chapel where the relic has been laid to rest. It is all quiet there, but a stroll through the Rue de l'Âne Aveugle and across the canal by the bridge which leads to the purlieus of the fish-markets brings one upon another scene. Every second house, if not every house, is a café, 'herberg,' or 'estaminet,'

with a bar and sanded floor and some rough chairs and tables; and on the night of the Procession of the Holy Blood they are crowded to the doors. Peasants from the country are there in great force. For some days before and after the sacred festival the villagers are in the habit of coming into Bruges — whole families of them, father and mother, sons and daughters, all in their best finery. They walk through the streets, following the route by which the Holy Blood is carried, telling their beads and saying their prayers, crossing themselves, and kneeling at any image of Christ, or Madonna, or saint, which they may notice at the street corners. It is curious to watch their sunburnt faces and uncouth ways as they slouch along, their hands busy with their beads, and their lips never ceasing for a moment to mutter prayer after prayer. They follow in the wake of the Procession of the Holy Blood, or wait to fall upon their knees when it passes and receive the blessing of the Bishop, who walks with fingers raised, scattering benedictions from side to side. In the evening, before starting for home, they go to the cafés.

As evening passes into night the sounds of music and dancing are heard. At the doors people sit

drinking round tables placed on the pavement or in the rank, poisonous gutter. The hot air is heavy with the smell of decayed fish. Inside the cafés men and women, old and young, are dancing in the fetid atmosphere to jingling pianos or accordions. The heat, the close, sour fumes of musty clothing, tobacco, beer, gin, fried fish, and unwashed humanity, are overpowering. There are disgusting sights in all directions. Fat women, with red, perspiring faces and dirty fingers, still clutching their rosaries; tawdry girls, field-workers, with flushed faces, dancing with country lads, most of whom are more than half tipsy; ribald jokes and laughter and leering eyes; reeling, drunken men; maudlin affection in one corner, and jealous disputing in another; crying babies; beer and gin spilt on the tables; and all sorts of indecency and hideous details which Swift might have gloated over or Hogarth painted.

This is how the day of the Holy Blood procession is finished by many of the countryfolk. The brutal cabaret comes after the prayers and adoration of the morning! It is a world of contrasts. But soon the lights are out, the shutters are put up, the last customer goes staggering homewards, and the Belfry speaks again, as it spoke when

the sweet singer lay dreaming at the Fleur-de-Blé :

‘ In the ancient town of Bruges,
In the quaint old Flemish city,
As the evening shades descended,
Low and loud and sweetly blended,
Low at times and loud at times,
And changing like a poet's rhymes,
Rang the beautiful wild chimes
From the Belfry in the market
Of the ancient town of Bruges.
Then, with deep sonorous clangour,
Calmly answering their sweet anger,
When the wrangling bells had ended,
Slowly struck the clock eleven,
And, from out the silent heaven,
Silence on the town descended.
Silence, silence everywhere,
On the earth and in the air,
Save that footsteps here and there
Of some burgher home returning,
By the street lamps faintly burning,
For a moment woke the echoes
Of the ancient town of Bruges.’



BRUGES

Quai des Marbriers.



THE BRUGES MATINS—BATTLE OF THE GOLDEN SPURS

CHAPTER IV

THE BRUGES MATINS—BATTLE OF THE GOLDEN SPURS

The visitor to Bruges is reminded, wherever he goes, of the stirring events which fill the chronicles of the town for several centuries. Opposite the Belfry, in the middle of the Market-Place, is the monument to Peter De Coninck and John Breidel, on which garlands of flowers are laid every summer, in memory of what they did when the burghers rose against the French in May, 1302; and amongst the modern frescoes which cover the walls of the Grande Salle des Échevins in the Hôtel de Ville, with its roof of fourteenth-century woodwork, is one which represents the return from the Battle of the Golden Spurs, that famous fight in which the hardy peasantry of Flanders overthrew the knights of France whom Philip the Fair had sent to avenge the blood of the Frenchmen who had died on the terrible morning of the 'Bruges Matins.'

The fourteenth century had opened. The town

had now reached the limits which have contained it ever since—an irregular oval with a circumference of between four and five miles, surrounded by double ditches, and a strong wall pierced by nine fortified gateways; and as the town had grown, the privileges and liberties of the townsmen had grown likewise. Sturdy, independent, and resolved to keep the management of their own affairs in their own hands, the burghers of Bruges, like those of the other Flemish towns, had succeeded in establishing a system of self-government so complete that it roused the opposition of Guy de Dampierre, Count of Flanders, whose efforts to diminish the power of these communities at length brought about a crisis which gave Philip the Fair of France an excuse for interfering. The Count, having to contend both against his own subjects and against the ambitions of the King of France, fell from power, and in the end Flanders was annexed to France.

Soon after this rich province had been added to his domains, Philip came with his wife, Joanna of Navarre, on a visit to Bruges. Already there were two factions in the town—the Leliarts, or French party, consisting chiefly of the upper classes, and the Clauwerts, or Flemish party, to which the mass of the people belonged. By the former Philip was

received in royal fashion, and so magnificent were the dresses and jewels worn by the wives and daughters of the nobles and rich burgesses, who sat in the windows and balconies as the royal procession passed along, that the Queen was moved to jealousy. 'I thought,' she said, 'that I alone was Queen; but here in this place I have six hundred rivals.' But in the streets below there were sullen looks and murmurs of discontent, which grew louder and louder every day, when, after the departure of the Court, the magistrates, who belonged to the French party, proposed that the merchant guilds should find money to defray some of the expenses which had been incurred on this occasion.

At this time Peter De Coninck was Dean of the Guild of Weavers, a man of substance, popular and eloquent. There was a tumultuous gathering in the Market-Place, when, standing in front of the Belfry, with the leaders of five-and-twenty guilds around him, he declaimed on liberty, and attacked the magistrates, calling on his fellow-townsmen to resist the taxes. The city officers, on the order of the magistrates, arrested De Coninck and his chief supporters, and hurried them to the prison in the Bourg. But in a few hours the mob forced an

entrance and released them. The signal for revolt had been given, and for some months Bruges, like the rest of Flanders, was in disorder. De Coninck, who had been joined by John Breidel, Dean of the Guild of Butchers, was busy rousing the people in all parts of the country. He visited Ghent, amongst other places, and tried to persuade the magistrates that if Ghent and Bruges united their forces the whole Flemish people would rise, crush the Leliarts, and expel the French. But the men of Ghent would not listen to him, and he returned to Bruges. Here, too, he met with a rebuff, for the magistrates, having heard that Jacques de Châtillon, whom Philip had made Governor of Flanders, was marching on the town, would not allow him to remain amongst them. He went to Damme, and with him went, not only Breidel, but 5,000 burghers of the national party, stout Clauwerts, who had devoted themselves to regaining the liberty of their country.

When Châtillon rode up to the walls of Bruges and demanded entrance the magistrates agreed to open the gates, on condition that he brought with him only 300 men-at-arms. But he broke his word, and the town was entered by 2,000 knights, whose haughty looks and threatening language



A FLEMISH YOUNG WOMAN



convinced the people that treachery was intended. It was whispered in the Market-Place that the waggons which rumbled over the drawbridges carried ropes with which the Clauwerts who had remained in the town were to be hanged; that there was to be a general massacre, in which not even the women and children would be spared; and that the Frenchmen never unbuckled their swords or took off their armour, but were ready to begin the slaughter at any moment. It was a day of terror in Bruges, and when evening came some of the burghers slipped out, made their way to Damme, and told De Coninck what was passing in the town.

That night Châtillon gave a feast to his chief officers, and amongst his guests was Pierre Flotte, Chancellor of France, perhaps the ablest of those jurists by whose evil councils Philip the Fair was encouraged in the ideas of autocracy which led him to make the setting up of a despotism the policy of his whole life. With Flotte—'that Belial,' as Pope Boniface VIII. once called him—and the rest, Châtillon sat revelling till a late hour. The night wore on; De Châtillon's party broke up, and went to rest; the weary sentinels were half asleep at their posts; and soon all Bruges was buried in silence. Here and there lights twinkled in some

of the guild-houses, where a few of the burghers sat anxiously waiting for what the morrow might bring forth, while others went to the ramparts on the north, and strained their eyes to see if help was coming from Damme.

At early dawn—it was Friday, May 18, 1302—the watchers on the ramparts saw a host of armed men rapidly approaching the town. They were divided into two parties, one of which, led by De Coninck, made for the Porte Ste. Croix, while the other, under Breidel, marched to the Porte de Damme, a gateway which no longer exists, but which was then one of the most important entrances, being that by which travellers came from Damme and Sluis. Messengers from the ramparts ran swiftly through the streets, in which daylight was now beginning to appear, and spread the news from house to house. Silently the burghers took their swords and pikes, left their homes, and gathered in the Market-Place and near the houses in which the French were sleeping. The French slept on till, all of a sudden, they were wakened by the tramp of feet, the clash of arms, and shouts of 'Flanders for the Lion!' Breidel had led his men into the town, and they were rushing through the streets to where Châtillon had taken up his

quarters, while De Coninck, having passed through the Porte Ste. Croix, was marching to the Bourg. The Frenchmen, bewildered, surprised, and only half awake, ran out into the streets. The Flemings were shouting 'Schilt ende Vriendt! Schilt ende Vriendt!'* and every man who could not pronounce these words was known to be a Frenchman, and slain upon the spot. Some fled to the gates; but at every gate they found a band of guards, who called out 'Schilt ende Vriendt!' and put them to the sword.

All that summer's morning, and on throughout the day, the massacre continued. Old men, women, and children hurled stones from the roofs and windows down upon the enemy. Breidel, a man of great strength, killed many with his own hand, and those whom he wounded were beaten to death where they fell by the apprentices with their iron clubs. In the Market-Place, close to where the monument to De Coninck and Breidel stands, a party of soldiers, under a gallant French knight, Gauthier de Sapignies, made a stand; but they were overpowered and slaughtered to the last man. Châtillon tried to rally his forces, but the surprise had been too complete, and, disguising himself in

* 'Shield and Friend!'

the cassock of a priest, he hid, in company with Chancellor Flotte, till it was dark, when they managed to escape from the town. By this time the carnage had ceased; the walls of the houses and the gutters ran with blood; and the burghers of Bruges had done their work so thoroughly that 2,000 Frenchmen lay dead upon the streets.

But the final reckoning with France was yet to come. When Châtillon reached Paris and told his master the direful story of the Bruges Matins, Philip swore revenge; and a few weeks later an army 40,000 strong invaded Flanders, under the Comte d'Artois, with whom rode also Châtillon, Flotte, and many nobles of France. The Flemings went to meet them—not only the burghers of Bruges, led by De Coninck and Breidel, marching under the banners of their guilds, but men from every part of Flanders—and on July 11, near Courtrai, the Battle of the Golden Spurs was fought.

The ground was marshy, with a stream and pools of water between the two armies; and just as the Scots at Bannockburn, twelve years afterwards, prepared pitfalls for the heavy cavalry of England, so the Flemings laid a trap for the French knights by cutting down brushwood and covering the



A FLEMISH BURGHER



water. The horsemen, clad in cumbrous armour, charged, the brushwood gave way, and most of them sank into the water. The Comte d'Artois got clear, but was beaten to the ground and killed. The Chancellor Flotte, who had boasted that he would bring the people of Bruges to their knees, was trampled to death. Châtillon died too; and when, at last, a long day's fighting came to an end, the Flemings had gained a complete victory. By this battle, which took its name from the thousands of golden spurs which were torn from the French knights who fell, the victors secured—for a time, at least—the liberty of their country, and the memory of it was for many a day to Flanders what the memory of Bannockburn was to Scotland, or of Morgarten to Switzerland.

DAMME—THE SEA-FIGHT AT SLUIS—SPLENDOUR OF BRUGES IN THE MIDDLE AGES—THE FALL AND LOSS OF TRADE

CHAPTER V

DAMME—THE SEA-FIGHT AT SLUIS—SPLENDOUR OF BRUGES IN THE MIDDLE AGES—THE FALL AND LOSS OF TRADE

DAMME, where the patriots mustered on the eve of the Bruges Matins, is within a short hour's stroll from the east end of the town. The Roya, which disappears from view, as we have already seen, opposite the Quai du Rosaire, emerges from its hidden course at the west end of the Quai du Miroir, where the statue of Jan van Eyck stands near the door of the building now used as a public library. This building was once the Customs House of Bruges, conveniently situated in the neighbourhood of the Market-Place, and on the side of the Roya, which thence stretches eastwards between the Quai du Miroir and the Quai Spinola for a few hundred yards, and then turns sharply to the north, and continues between the Quai Long and the Quai de la Potterie, which are built in rambling fashion on either side of the water. Some of the

houses are old, others of no earlier date, apparently, than the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries; some large and well preserved, and some mere cottages, half ruinous, with low gables and faded yellow fronts, huddled together on the rough causeway, alongside of which are moored canal-boats with brown hulls and deck-houses gay with white and green paint. At the end of the Quai de la Potterie is the modern Bassin de Commerce, in which the Roya loses itself, the harbour for the barges and small steamers which come by the canal connecting Ostend with Bruges and Ghent; and near this was, in ancient days, the Porte de Damme, through which Breidel and his followers burst on that fateful morning in May 600 years ago.

To the right of the Bassin a broad canal, constructed by Napoleon in 1810, extends in a straight line eastwards, contained within dykes which raise it above a wide expanse of level meadow-lands intersected by ditches, and dotted here and there by the white-walled cottages with red roofs and green outside shutters which are so typical of Flemish scenery. About two miles out of Bruges one comes in sight of a windmill perched on a slope at the side of the canal, a square church-tower, a few houses, and some grassy mounds, which were once strong

fortifications. Even the historical imagination, which everyone who walks round Bruges must carry with him, is hardly equal to realizing that this was once a bustling seaport, with a harbour in which more than a hundred merchant ships, laden with produce from all parts of the world, were sometimes lying at the same time. In those busy times Damme, they say, contained 50,000 inhabitants; now there are only about 1,100.

Beyond Damme the canal winds on through the same flat landscape, low-lying, water-logged, with small farmhouses and scanty trees, and in the distance, on the few patches of higher ground, the churches of Oostkerke and Westcapelle. At last, soon after passing the Dutch frontier, the canal ends in a little dock with gray, lichen-covered sides; and this is Sluis, a dull place, with a few narrow streets, a market-place, two churches, and a belfry of the fourteenth century. It is quite inland now, miles from the salt water; and from the high ramparts which still surround it the view extends to the north across broad green fields, covering what was once the bed of the sea, in the days when the tide ebbed and flowed in the channel of the Zwijn, over which ships passed sailing on their way to Bruges. But any English traveller who,

having gone a little way out of the beaten track of summer tourists, may chance to mount the ramparts, and look down upon the fields which stretch away to the shores of the North Sea and the estuary of the Scheldt, and inland beyond Damme to the Belfry and the spires of Bruges, is gazing on the scene of a great event in the naval history of England.

Here, on what is now dry land, on the morning of June 24, 1340, 800 ships of war, full of armed men—35,000 of them—were drawn up in line of battle ; and further out to sea, beyond the entrance of the Zwijn, the newly-risen sun was shining on the sails of another fleet which was manœuvring in the offing.

'In the cities of Flanders,' says Dr. Gardiner, 'had arisen manufacturing populations which supplied the countries round with the products of the loom. To the Ghent and Bruges of the Middle Ages England stood in the same relation as that which the Australian colonies hold to the Leeds and Bradford of our own day. The sheep which grazed over the wide, unenclosed pasture-lands of our island formed a great part of the wealth of England, and that wealth depended entirely on the flourishing trade with the Flemish towns in



BRUGES

Qua du Miroir.



which English wool was converted into cloth.' When, therefore, Edward III. claimed the throne of France, and the Hundred Years' War began, it was of vital importance to the trade of Flanders and England that the merchants of the two countries should maintain friendly relations with each other. But Philip of Valois had persuaded the Count of Flanders, Louis de Nevers, to order the arrest of all the English in Flanders, and Edward had retaliated by arresting all the Flemings who were in England, and forbidding the export of English wool to Flanders. The result was that the weavers of Bruges and the other manufacturing towns of Flanders found themselves on the road to ruin; and, having no interest in the question at issue between the Kings of France and England, apart from its effect on their commercial prosperity, the burghers of Bruges, Ghent, and Ypres, under the leadership of the famous Jacob van Artevelde (anticipating, as one of the modern historians of Bruges has noticed, what the Great Powers did for Belgium in 1830*), succeeded in securing, with the assent of Philip, the neutrality of Flanders. The French King, however, did not keep faith with the Flemings, but proceeded to acts of aggression

* Robinson, *Bruges, an Historical Sketch*, p. 107.

against them, and a league against France was formed between England and Flanders.

In June, 1340, Edward, who was then in England, hearing that an immense number of French ships of war were at anchor in the Zwijn, set sail to give them battle with a squadron of 300 vessels. The English fleet anchored off the coast between Blankenberghe and Heyst on the evening of June 23, and from the top of the dunes the English scouts saw in the distance the masts of the French ships in the Zwijn.

As soon as there was light next morning, the English weighed anchor and sailed along the coast to the east; past lonely yellow sands, which have swarmed during recent years with workmen toiling at the construction of the immense harbour of See-Brugge, which is to be the future port of Bruges; past what was then the small fishing hamlet of Heyst; past a range of barren dunes, amongst which to-day Duinbergen, the latest of the Flemish watering-places, with its spacious hotel and trim villas, is being laid out; past a waste of storm-swept sand and rushes, on which are now the digue of Knocke, a cluster of hotels and crowded lodging-houses, and a golf-course; and so onwards till they opened the mouth of the Zwijn, and saw the French ships

crowding the entrance, 'their masts appearing to be like a great wood,' and beyond them the walls of Sluis rising from the wet sands left by the receding tide.

It was low-water, and while waiting for the turn of the tide the English fleet stood out to sea for some time, so that Nicholas Béhuchet, the French Admiral, began to flatter himself that King Edward, finding himself so completely outnumbered, would not dare to risk fighting against such odds. The odds, indeed, were nearly three to one against the English seamen; but as soon as the tide began to flow they steered straight into the channel, and, Edward leading the van, came to close quarters, ship to ship. The famous archers of England, who six years later were to do such execution at Crecy, lined the bulwarks, and poured in a tempest of arrows so thick that men fell from the tops of the French ships like leaves before a storm. The first of the four lines in which Béhuchet had drawn up his fleet was speedily broken, and the English, brandishing their swords and pikes, boarded the French ships, drove their crews overboard, and hoisted the flag of England. King Edward was wounded, and the issue may have been doubtful, when suddenly more ships, coming from the North

of England, appeared in sight, and hordes of Flemings from all parts of Flanders, from the coast, and even from inland towns so far away as Ypres,* came swarming in boats to join in the attack. This decided the fate of the great battle, which continued till sunset. When it ended, the French fleet had ceased to exist, with the exception of a few ships which escaped when it was dark. The Flemings captured Béhuchet, and hung him then and there. Nearly 30,000 of his men perished, many of whom were drowned while attempting to swim ashore, or were clubbed to death by the Flemings who lined the beach, waiting to take vengeance on the invaders for having burned their homesteads and carried off their flocks. The English lost two ships and 4,000 men; but the victory was so complete that no courtier was bold enough to carry the news to King Philip, who did not know what had befallen his great fleet till the Court jester went to him, and said, 'Oh! the English cowards! the English cowards! they had not the courage to jump into the sea as our noble Frenchmen did at Sluis.'

It is strange to think that Flemish peasants work, and cattle feed, and holiday visitors from

* Vereecke, *Histoire Militaire de la Ville d'Ypres*, p. 36.

Knocke, or Sluis, or Kadzand ramble about dry-shod where the waves were rolling in on that midsummer's morning, and that far beneath the grass the timbers of so many stout ships and the bones of so many valiant seamen have long since mouldered away. And it is also strange to think, when wandering along the canals of Bruges, where now the swans glide silently about in the almost stagnant water which laps the basements of the old houses, how in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries ships of every nation carried in great bales of merchandise, and that rich traders stored them in warehouses and strong vaults, which are now mere coal-cellars, or the dark and empty haunts of the rats which swarm in the canals.

'There is,' says Mr. Robinson, 'in the National Library at Paris a list of the kingdoms and cities which sent their produce to Bruges at that time. England sent wool, lead, tin, coal, and cheese; Ireland and Scotland, chiefly hides and wool; Denmark, pigs; Russia, Hungary, and Bohemia, large quantities of wax; Poland, gold and silver; Germany, wine; Liége, copper kettles; and Bulgaria, furs.' After naming many parts of Europe, Asia, and Africa, that sent goods, the manuscript adds: 'And all the aforesaid realms and regions

send their merchants with wares to Flanders, besides those who come from France, Poitou, and Gascony, and from the three islands of which we know not the names of their kingdoms.' The trade of Bruges was enormous. People flocked there from all quarters.

> 'Lombard and Venetian merchants with deep-laden argosies;
> Ministers from twenty nations; more than royal pomp and ease.'

We read of 150 ships entering in one day, and of German merchants buying 2,600 pieces of cloth, made by Flemish weavers, in a morning's marketing. A citizen of Bruges was always at the head of the Hanseatic League, and maintained the rights of that vast commercial society under the title of 'Comte de la Hanse.' Merchant princes, members of the Hanse, lived here in palaces. Money-changers grew rich. Edward III. borrowed from the Bardi at Bruges on the security of the Crown jewels of England. Contracts of insurance against maritime risks were entered into from an early period, and the merchant shipping code which regulated traffic by sea was known as the 'Röles de Damme.'* There were twenty consulates at

* Gilliodts van Severen, *Bruges Ancienne et Moderne*, p. 14.

one time in Bruges, and the population of the town is said, though it is difficult to believe that this is not an exaggeration, to have been more than 200,000 before the middle of the fourteenth century.

Six years after the Battle of Sluis, Louis of Nevers was killed at Crecy, and his son, Louis of Maele, reigned in his stead as Count of Flanders. He was a Leliart to the core, and his reign of nearly forty years, one long struggle against the liberties of his people, witnessed the capture of Bruges by Philip van Artevelde, the invasion of Flanders by the French, the defeat of the Nationalists, and the death of Van Artevelde on the field of Roosebeke. Nevertheless, during this period and after it Bruges grew in beauty and in wealth. The Hôtel de Ville, without the grandeur of the Hôtel de Ville at Brussels, but still a gem of mediæval architecture, was built on the site of the old 'Ghiselhuis' of Baldwin Bras-de-Fer. Other noble buildings, rich in design and beautiful in all their outlines, and great mansions, with marble halls and ceilings of exquisitely carved woodwork, rose on every side; towers and pinnacles, shapely windows and graceful arches, overhung the waterways; luxury increased; in the homes of the nobles and wealthy merchants were stores of

precious stones, tapestries, silk, fine linen, cloth of gold; the churches and many buildings gleamed with gilded stone and tinted glass and brilliant frescoes. Art flourished as the town grew richer. The elder and the younger Van Eyck, Gerard David, and Memlinc, with many others before and after them, were attracted by its splendour, as modern painters have been attracted by its decay; and though the 'Adoration of the Immaculate Lamb' hangs in the choir of St. Bavon at Ghent, the genius which coloured that matchless altar-piece found its inspiration within the walls of Bruges.

The history of Bruges for many long years, especially under the rule of the House of Burgundy, was, in the midst of war, turmoil, and rebellion, the history of continuous progress. But all this prosperity depended on the sea. So long as the Zwijn remained open, neither war nor faction, not even the last great rising against the Archduke Maximilian, which drove away the foreign merchants, most of whom went to Antwerp, and so impoverished the town that no less than 5,000 houses were standing empty in the year 1405,* could have entirely ruined Bruges. These disasters might have been retrieved if the

* Gilliodts van Severen, p. 25.

channel of communication with Damme and Sluis had not been lost; but for a long time the condition of this important waterway had been the cause of grave anxiety to the people of Bruges. The heavy volume of water which poured with every ebbing tide down the Scheldt between Flushing and Breskens swept past the island of Walcheren, and spread out into the North Sea and down the English Channel, leaving the mud it carried with it on the sands round the mouth of the Zwijn, which itself did not discharge a current strong enough to prevent the slow but sure formation of a bank across its entrance. Charters, moreover, had been granted to various persons, under which they drained the adjoining lands, and gradually reclaimed large portions from the sea. The channel, at no time very deep, became shallower, narrower, and more difficult of access, until at last, during the second half of the fifteenth century, the passage between Sluis and Damme was navigable only by small ships. Soon the harbour at Damme was nearly choked up with sand. Many schemes were tried in the hope of preserving the Zwijn, but the sea-trade of Bruges dwindled away to a mere nothing, and finally disappeared before the middle of the sixteenth century.

And so Bruges fell from greatness. There are still some traces of the ancient bed of the Zwijn amongst the fields near Coolkerke, a village a short distance to the north of Bruges—a broad ditch with broken banks, and large pools of slimy water lying desolate and forlorn in a wilderness of tangled bushes. These are now the only remains of the highway by which the 'deep-laden argosies' used to enter in the days of old.



‘BRUGES LA MORTE’

CHAPTER VI

'BRUGES LA MORTE'

THEY call it 'Bruges la Morte,' and at every turn there is something to remind us of the deadly blight which fell upon the city when its trade was lost. The faded colours, the timeworn brickwork, the indescribable look of decay which, even on the brightest morning, throws a shade of melancholy over the whole place, lead one to think of some aged dame, who has 'come down in the world,' wearing out the finery of better days. It is all very sad and pathetic, but strangely beautiful, and the painter never lived who could put on canvas the mellow tints with which Time has clothed these old walls, and thus veiled with tender hand the havoc it has made. To stand on the bridge which crosses the canal at the corner of the Quai des Marbriers and the Quai Vert, where the pinnacles of the Palais du Franc and the roof of the Hôtel de Ville, with the Belfry just showing above them, and dull red walls rising from the water, make up

a unique picture of still-life, is to read a sermon in stones, an impressive lesson in history.

The loss of trade brought Bruges face to face with the 'question of the unemployed' in a very aggravated form. How to provide for the poor became a most serious problem, and so many of the people were reduced to living on charity that almshouses sprang up all over the town. God's Houses ('Godshuisen') they called them, and call them still. They are to be found in all directions—quaint little places, planted down here and there, each with a small chapel of its own, with moss-grown roofs and dingy walls, and doors that open on to the uneven cobbles. Every stone of them spells pauperism. The Church does much towards maintaining these shelters for the poor—perhaps too much, if it is true that there are 10,000 paupers in Bruges out of a population of about 55,000. There is a great deal of begging in the streets, and a sad lack of sturdy self-respect amongst the lower class, which many think is caused by the system of doles, for which the Church is chiefly responsible. Bruges might not have been so picturesque to-day if her commerce had survived; but the beauty of a town is dearly purchased at the cost of such degradation and loss of personal independence.



BRUGES

View of the Palais du Franc.



It was not only the working class which suffered. Many rich families sank into poverty, and their homes, some of which were more like palaces than private houses, had to be dismantled. The fate of one of these lordly mansions is connected with an episode which carries us back into the social life of Bruges in the middle of the seventeenth century. On the right side of the Rue Haute, as one goes from the Place du Bourg, there is a high block containing two large houses, Nos. 6 and 8, of that street. It is now a big, plain building without a trace of architectural distinction; but in the seventeenth century it was a single mansion, built about the year 1320, and was one of the many houses with towers which gave the Bruges of that time almost the appearance of an Oriental city. It was called the House of the Seven Towers, from the seven pinnacles which surmounted it; and at the back there was a large garden, which extended to the canal and Quai des Marbriers.

In April, 1656, the 'tall man above two yards high, with dark brown hair, scarcely to be distinguished from black,' for whom the Roundheads had searched all England after the Battle of Worcester, found his way to Bruges, with his brother Henry, Duke of Gloucester, and the train of Royalists who

formed their Court. For nearly three years after Worcester, Charles II. had lived in France; but in July, 1654, the alliance between Cromwell and Mazarin drove him to Germany, where he remained till Don John of Austria became Governor of the Spanish Netherlands. Thereupon the prospect of recovering the English throne by the assistance of Spain led him to remove his Court, which had been established for some time at Cologne, to Flanders. He arrived at Bruges on April 22, 1656. His brother James, Duke of York, and afterwards King of England, held a commission in the French army, and Mazarin offered him a command in Italy. Charles, however, requested him to leave the French army, and enter the service of Spain. At first James refused; but by the mediation of their sister, the Princess of Orange, he was persuaded to do as his brother wished, and join the Court at Bruges. The Irish Viscount Tarah received Charles, when he first arrived, in his house in the Rue du Vieux Bourg, and there gave him, we read in local history, 'une brillante hospitalité.' But in the beginning of June the Court took up its quarters in the House of the Seven Towers.

During his sojourn in Flanders, Charles was carefully watched by the secret service officers of the

Commonwealth Government, who sent home reports of all he did. These reports, many of which are in the Thurloe State Papers and other collections, contain some curious details about the exiled Court.

There never was a more interesting 'English colony' at Bruges than at that time. Hyde, who received the Great Seal at Bruges, was there with Ormonde and the Earls of Bristol, Norwich, and Rochester. Sir Edward Nicholas was Secretary of State; and we read of Colonel Sydenham, Sir Robert Murray, and 'Mr. Cairless, who sat on the tree with Charles Stewart after Worcester fight. Another of the exiles at Bruges was Sir James Turner, the soldier of fortune, who served under Gustavus Adolphus, persecuted the Covenanters in Scotland, and is usually supposed to have been the original of Dugald Dalgetty in Sir Walter Scott's *Legend of Montrose*. A list of the royal household is still preserved at Bruges. It was prepared in order that the town council might fix the daily allowance of wine and beer which was to be given to the Court, and contains the names of about sixty persons, with a note of the supply granted to each family.

A 'Letter of Intelligence' (the report of a spy),

dated from Bruges on September 29, 1656, mentions that Lilly, the astrologer of London, had written to say that the King would be restored to the throne next year, and that all the English at Bruges were delighted. But in the meantime they were very hard up for ready money. Ever since leaving England Charles and his followers had suffered from the most direful impecuniosity. We find Hyde declaring that he has 'neither shoes nor shirt.' The King himself was constantly running into debt for his meals, and his friends spent many a hungry day at Bruges. If by good luck they chanced to be in funds, one meal a day sufficed for a party of half a dozen courtiers. If it was cold they could not afford to purchase firewood. The Earl of Norwich writes, saying that he has to move about so as to get lodgings on credit, and avoid people to whom he owes money. Colonel Borthwick, who claims to have served the King most faithfully, complains that he is in prison at Bruges on suspicion of disloyalty, has not changed his clothes for three years, and is compelled by lack of cash to go without a fire in winter. Sir James Hamilton, a gentleman-in-waiting, gets drunk one day, and threatens to kill the Lord Chancellor. He is starving, and declares it is Hyde's fault that



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Maison du Pélican (Almshouse).



the King gives him no money. He will put on a clean shirt to be hanged in, and not run away, being without so much as a penny. Then we have the petition of a poor fencing-master. 'Heaven,' he writes piteously, 'hears the groans of the lowest creatures, and therefore I trust that you, being a terrestrial deity, will not disdain my supplication.' He had come from Cologne to Bruges to teach the royal household, and wanted his wages, for he and his family were starving.

Don John of Austria visited Charles at Bruges, and an allowance from the King of Spain was promised, so that men might be levied for the operations against Cromwell; but the payments were few and irregular. 'The English Court,' says a letter of February, 1657, 'remains still at Bridges [Bruges], never in greater want, nor greater expectations of money, without which all their levies are like to be at a stand; for Englishmen cannot live on bread alone.'

A 'Letter of Intelligence' sent from Sluis says that Charles is 'much loocked upon, but littell respeckted.' And this is not wonderful if the reports sent home by the Commonwealth agents are to be trusted. One of the spies who haunted the neighbourhood of Bruges was a Mr. Butler,

who writes in the winter of 1656-1657: 'This last week one of the richest churches in Bruges was plundered in the night. The people of Bruges are fully persuaded that Charles Stewart's followers have done it. They spare no pains to find out the guilty, and if it happen to light upon any of Charles Stewart's train, it will mightily incense that people against them. . . . There is now a company of French comedians at Bruges, who are very punctually attended by Charles Stewart and his Court, and all the ladies there. Their most solemn day of acting is the Lord's Day. I think I may truly say that greater abominations were never practised among people than at this day at Charles Stewart's Court. Fornication, drunkenness, and adultery are esteemed no sins amongst them; so I persuade myself God will never prosper any of their attempts.'* In another letter we read that once, after a hunting expedition, Charles and a gentleman of the bedchamber were the only two who came back sober. Sir James Turner was mad when drunk, 'and that was pretty often,' says Bishop Burnet.

But, of course, it was the business of the spies to

* Letter from Mr. J. Butler, Flushing, December 2, 1656, Thurloe State Papers, V., 645.

blacken the character of Charles; and there can be little doubt that, in spite of his poverty and loose morals, he was well liked by the citizens of Bruges, who, notwithstanding a great deal of outward decorum, have at no time been very strait-laced. 'Charles,' we learn from a local history, 'sut se rendre populaire en prenant part aux amusements de la population et en se pliant, sans effort comme sans affectation, aux usages du pays.' During his whole period of exile he contrived to amuse himself. Affairs of gallantry, dancing, tennis, billiards, and other frivolous pursuits, occupied as much of his attention as the grave affairs of State over which Hyde and Ormonde spent so many anxious hours. When on a visit to Brussels in the spring of 1657, he employed, we are told, most of his time with Don John dancing, or at 'long paume, a Spanish play with balls filled with wire.' And, again: 'He passes his time with shooting at Bruges, and such other obscure pastimes.'

This 'shooting' was the favourite Flemish sport of shooting with bow and arrows at an artificial bird fixed on a high pole, the prize being, on great occasions, a golden bird, which was hung by a chain of gold round the winner's neck. In the records of the Guilds of St. George and St. Sebastian at

Bruges there are notices relating to Charles. The former was a society of cross-bowmen, the latter of archers. On June 11, 1656, Charles and the Duke of Gloucester were at the festival of the Society of St. George. Charles was the first to try his skill, and managed to hit the mark. After the Duke and many others had shot, Peter Pruyssenaere, a wine merchant in the Rue du Vieux Bourg, brought down the bird, and Charles hung the golden 'Bird of Honour' round his neck. On June 25 Charles visited the Society of St. Sebastian, when Michael Noé, a gardener, was the winner. The King and Gloucester both became members of the St. Sebastian, which is still a flourishing society. Going along the Rue des Carmes, the traveller passes the English convent on the left, and on the right, at the end of the street, comes to the Guild-house of St. Sebastian, with its slender tower and quiet garden, one of the pleasantest spots in Bruges. There the names of Charles and his brother are to be seen inscribed in a small volume bound in red morocco, the 'Bird of Honour' with its chain of gold, a silver arrow presented by the Duke of Gloucester, and some other interesting relics. On September 15, 1843, Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, King Leopold I., and the Queen of the Belgians,

went to the Rue des Carmes and signed their names as members of this society, which now possesses two silver cups, presented by the Queen of England in 1845 and 1893. The Duke of York seems to have been successful as an archer, for in the Hôtel de Ville at Bruges there is a picture by John van Meuninxhove, in which Charles is seen hanging the 'Bird of Honour' round his brother's neck.

In April, 1657, the English Government was informed that the Court of Charles was preparing to leave Bruges. 'Yesterday' (April 7) 'some of his servants went before to Brussels to make ready lodgings for Charles Stewart, the Duke of York, and the Duke of Gloucester. All that have or can compass so much money go along with Charles Stewart on Monday morning. I do admire how people live here for want of money. Our number is not increased since my last. The most of them are begging again for want of money; and when any straggling persons come, we have not so much money as will take a single man to the quarters; yet we promise ourselves great matters.' They were hampered in all their movements by this want of hard cash, for Charles was in debt at Bruges, and could not remove his goods until he paid his

creditors. It was sadly humiliating. 'The King,' we read, 'will hardly live at Bruges any more, but he cannot remove his family and goods till we get money.' The dilemma seems to have been settled by Charles, his brothers, and most of the Court going off to Brussels, leaving their possessions behind them. The final move did not take place till February, 1658, and Clarendon says that Charles never lived at Bruges after that date. He may, however, have returned on a short visit, for Jesse, in his *Memoirs of the Court of England under the Stuarts,* states that the King was playing tennis at Bruges when Sir Stephen Fox came to him with the great news, 'The devil is dead!' This would be in September, 1658, Cromwell having died on the third of that month. After the Restoration Charles sent to the citizens of Bruges a letter of thanks for the way in which they had received him. Nor did he forget, amidst the pleasures of the Court at Whitehall, the simple pastimes of the honest burghers, but presented to the archers of the Society of St. Sebastian the sum of 3,600 florins, which were expended on their hall of meeting.

More than a hundred years later, when the Stuart dynasty was a thing of the past and George III. was seated on the throne of England,

the Rue Haute saw the arrival of some travellers who were very different from the roystering Cavaliers and frail beauties who had made it gay in the days of the Merry Monarch. The English Jesuits of St. Omer, when expelled from their college, came to Bruges in August, 1762, and took up their abode in the House of the Seven Towers, where they found 'nothing but naked walls and empty chambers.' A miserable place it must have been. 'In one room a rough table of planks had been set up, and the famished travellers were rejoiced at the sight of three roast legs of mutton set on the primitive table. Knives, forks, and plates there were none. A Flemish servant divided the food with his pocket-knife. A farthing candle gave a Rembrandt-like effect to the scene. The boys slept that night on mattresses laid on the floor of one of the big empty rooms of the house. The first days at Bruges were cheerless enough.'* The religious houses, however, came to the rescue. Flemish monks and the nuns of the English convent helped the pilgrims, and the Jesuits soon established themselves at Bruges, where they remained in peace for a few years, till the Austrian Government drove them out. The same fate over-

* Robinson, *Bruges, an Historical Sketch*, p. 291.

took the inmates of many monasteries and convents at Bruges in the reign of Joseph II., whose reforming zeal led to that revolt of the Austrian Netherlands which was the prelude to the invasion of Flanders by the army of the French Revolution.

After the conquest of Belgium by the French it looked as if all the churches in Bruges were doomed. The Chapel of St. Basil was laid in ruins. The Church of St. Donatian, which had stood since the days of Baldwin Bras-de-Fer, was pulled down and disappeared entirely. Notre Dame, St. Sauveur, and other places of worship, narrowly escaped destruction; and it was not till the middle of the nineteenth century that the town recovered, in some measure, from these disasters.

Bruges has doubtless shared in the general prosperity which has spread over the country since Belgium became an independent kingdom after the revolution of 1830, but its progress has been slow. It has never lost its old-world associations; and the names of the streets and squares, and the traditions connected with numberless houses which a stranger might pass without notice, are all so many links with the past. There is the Rue Espagnole, for example, where a vegetable market is held every Wednesday. This was the quarter where the Spanish

merchants lived and did their business. There used to be a tall, dark, and, in fact, very dirty-looking old house in this street known by the Spanish name of the 'Casa Negra.' It was pulled down a few years ago; but lower down, at the foot of the street, the great cellars in which the Spaniards stored their goods remain; and on the Quai Espagnol was the Spanish Consulate, now a large dwelling-house. A few steps from the Quai Espagnol is the Place des Orientaux (Oosterlingen Plaats), where a minaret of tawny brick rises above the gables of what was once the Consulate of Smyrna, and on the north side of which, in the brave days of old, stood the splendid Maison des Orientaux, the headquarters of the Hanseatic League in Bruges, the finest house in Flanders, with turrets and soaring spire, and marvellous façade, and rooms inside all ablaze with gilding. The glory has departed; two modern dwelling-houses have taken the place of this commercial palace; but it must surely be a very dull imagination on which the sight of this spot, now so tranquil and commonplace, but once the centre of such important transactions, makes no impression. From the Place des Orientaux it is only a few minutes' stroll to the Rue Cour de Gand and the dark brown wooden front of the

small house, now a lace shop, which tradition says was one of Memlinc's homes in Bruges, where we can fancy him, laboriously and with loving care, putting the last minute touches to some immortal painting.

Then there is the Rue Anglaise, off the Quai Spinola, where the English Merchant Adventurers met to discuss their affairs in houses with such names as 'Old England' or 'The Tower of London.' The head of the colony, 'Governor of the English Nation beyond the Seas' they called him, was a very busy man 400 years ago.* The Scottish merchants were settled in the same district, close to the Church of Ste. Walburge. They called their house 'Scotland,' and doubtless made as good bargains as the 'auld enemy' in the next street. There is a building called the Parijssche Halle, or Halle de Paris, hidden away among the houses to the west of the Market-Place, with a café and a theatre where Flemish plays are acted now, which was formerly the Consulate of France; and subscription balls and amateur theatricals are given by the English residents of to-day in the fourteenth-century house of the Genoese merchants in the Rue Flamande. The list of streets and houses

* In the *Flandria Illustrata* of Sanderus, vol. i., p. 275, there is a picture of the 'Domus Anglorum.'



BRUGES

Vegetable Market.



with old-time associations like these might be extended indefinitely, for in Bruges the past is ever present.

Even the flat-fronted, plain houses with which poverty or the bad taste of the last century replaced many of the older buildings do not spoil the picturesque appearance of the town as a whole, because it is no larger now than it was 600 years ago, and these modern structures are quite lost amongst their venerable neighbours. Thus Bruges retains its mediæval character. In the midst, however, of all this wealth of architectural beauty and historical interest, the atmosphere of common everyday life seems to be so very dull and depressing that people living there are apt to be driven, by sheer boredom, into spending their lives in a round of small excitements and incessant, wearisome gossip, and into taking far more interest in the paltry squabbles of their neighbours over some storm in a teacup than in the more important topics which invigorate the minds of men and women in healthier and broader societies. Long before Rodenbach's romance was written this peculiarity of Bruges was proverbial throughout Belgium.

But it is possible that a change is at hand, and that Bruges may once again become, not the Venice

of the North—the time for that is past—but an important town, for the spirit of commercial enterprise which has done so much for other parts of Belgium during the last seventy-five years is now invading even this quiet place, whose citizens have begun to dream of recovering some portion of their former prosperity. In 1895 the Belgian Parliament passed a law providing for the construction, between Blankenberghe and Heyst, of a harbour connected with Bruges by a canal of large dimensions, and of an inner port at the town. The works at See-Brugge, as the outer port is called, are nearly completed, and will allow vessels drawing 26½ feet of water to float at any state of the tide. The jetty describes a large curve, and the bend is such that its extremity is parallel to the coast, and 930 yards distant from the low-water mark. The sheltered roadstead is about 272 acres in extent, and communication is made with the canal by a lock 66 feet wide and 282 yards in length. From this point the canal, which has a depth of 26½ feet and is fed by sea-water, runs in a straight line to Bruges, and ends at the inner port, which is within a few hundred yards of where the Roya used to meet the Zwijn. It is capable of affording a minimum capacity of 1,000,000 tons per annum, and the whole equipment has been

fitted up necessary for dealing with this amount of traffic.

The first ship, an English steamer, entered the new port at Bruges on the morning of May 29 in the present year (1905). The carillon rung from the Belfry, guns were fired, and a ceremony in honour of the event took place in the Hôtel de Ville. It now remains to be seen whether any part of the trade which was lost 400 years ago can be recovered by the skill of modern engineers and the resources of modern capital.

THE PLAIN OF WEST FLANDERS —YPRES

CHAPTER VII

THE PLAIN OF WEST FLANDERS—YPRES

To the west of Bruges the wide plain of Flanders extends to the French frontier. Church spires and windmills are the most prominent objects in the landscape; but though the flatness of the scenery is monotonous, there is something pleasing to the eye in the endless succession of well-cultivated fields, interrupted at intervals by patches of rough bushland, canals, or slow-moving streams winding between rows of pollards, country houses embowered in woods and pleasure-grounds, cottages with fruitful gardens, orchards, small villages, and compact little towns, in most of which the diligent antiquary will find something of interest —a modest belfry, perhaps, with a romance of its own; a parish church, whose foundations were laid long ago in ground dedicated, in the distant past, to the worship of Thor or Woden; or the remains, it may be, of a mediæval castle, from which some worthy knight, whose name is for-

gotten except in local traditions, rode away to the Crusades.

This part of West Flanders, which lies wedged in between the coast, with its populous bathing stations, and the better-known district immediately to the south of it, where Ghent, Tournai, Courtrai, and other important centres draw many travellers every year, is seldom visited by strangers, who are almost as much stared at in some of the villages as they would be in the streets of Pekin. It is, however, very accessible. The roads are certainly far from good, and anything in the shape of a walking tour is out of the question, for the strongest pedestrian would have all his pleasure spoilt by the hard-going of the long, straight causeway. The ideal way to see the Netherlands and study the life of the people is to travel on the canals ; but these are not so numerous here as in other parts of the country, and, besides, it is not very easy to arrange for a passage on the barges. But, in addition to the main lines of the State Railway, there are the 'Chemins-de-fer Vicinaux,' or light district railways, which run through all parts of Belgium. The fares on these are very low, and there are so many stoppages that the traveller can see a great many places in the course of a single



THE FLEMISH PLAIN



day. There are cycle tracks, too, alongside most of the roads, the cost of keeping them in order being paid out of the yearly tax paid by the owners of bicycles.*

This is the most purely Flemish part of Flanders. One very seldom notices that Spanish type of face which is so common elsewhere—at Antwerp, for instance. Here the race is almost unmixed, and the peasants speak nothing but Flemish to each other. Many of them do not understand a word of French, though in Belgium French is, as everyone knows, the language of public life and of literature. The newspapers published in Flemish are small, and do not contain much beyond local news. The result is that the country people in West Flanders know very little of what is going on in the world beyond their own parishes. The standard of education is low, being to a great extent in the hands of the clergy, who have hitherto succeeded in defeating all proposals for making it universal and compulsory.

But, steeped as most of them are in ignorance and superstition, the agricultural labourers of West Flanders are, to all appearance, quite contented

* Bicycles entering Belgium pay an *ad valorem* duty of 12 per cent.

with their lot. Living is cheap, and their wants are few. Coffee, black bread, potatoes, and salted pork, are the chief articles of diet, and in some households even the pork is a treat for special occasions. They seldom taste butter, using lard instead; and the 'margarine' which is sold in the towns does not find its way into the cottages of the outlying country districts. Sugar has for many years been much dearer than in England, and the price is steadily rising, but with this exception the food of the people is cheap. Tea enters Belgium duty free, but the peasants never use it. Many villagers smoke coarse tobacco grown in their own gardens, and a 10-centimes cigar is the height of luxury. Tobacco being a State monopoly in France, the high price in that country makes smuggling common, and there is a good deal of contraband trading carried on in a quiet way on the frontiers of West Flanders. The average wage paid for field labour is from 1 franc 50 centimes to 2 francs a day for married men—that is to say, from about 1s. 3d. to 1s. 8d. of English money. Bachelors generally receive 1 franc (10d.) a day and their food. The working hours are long, often from five in the morning till eight in the evening in summer, and in winter from sunrise till

sunset, with one break at twelve o'clock for dinner, consisting of bread with pork and black coffee, and another about four in the afternoon, when what remains of the mid-day meal is consumed.

The Flemish farmhouse is generally a substantial building, with two large living-rooms, in which valuable old pieces of furniture are still occasionally to be found, though the curiosity dealers have, during the last quarter of a century, carried most of them away, polished them up, and sold them at a high profit. Carved chests, bearing the arms of ancient families, have been discovered lying full of rubbish in barns or stables, and handsome cabinets, with fine mouldings and brass fittings, have frequently been picked up for a few francs. The heavy beams of the ceilings, black with age, the long Flemish stoves, and the quaint window-seats deeply sunk in the thick walls, still remain, and make the interiors of many of these houses very picturesque; but the 'finds' of old furniture, curious brass or pewter dishes, and even stray bits of valuable tapestry, which used to rouse the cupidity of strangers, are now very rare. Almost all the brass work which is so eagerly bought by credulous tourists at Bruges in summer is bran-new stuff cleverly manufactured for sale

—and sold it is at five or six times its real market value! There are no bargains to be picked up on the Dyver or in the shops of Bruges.

The country life is simple. A good deal of hard drinking goes on in most villages. More beer, probably, is consumed in Belgium per head of the population than in any other European country, Germany not excepted, and the system of swallowing 'little glasses' of fiery spirit on the top of beer brings forth its natural fruits. The drunken ways of the people are encouraged by the excessive number of public-houses. Practically anyone who can pay the Government fee and obtain a barrel of beer and a few tumblers may open a drinking-shop. It is not uncommon in a small country village with about 200 inhabitants to see the words 'Herberg' or 'Estaminet' over the doors of a dozen houses, in which beer is sold at a penny (or less) for a large glass, and where various throat-burning liquors of the *petit verre* species can be had at the same price; and the result is that very often a great portion of the scanty wage paid on Saturday evening is melted into beer or gin on Sunday and Monday. As a rule, the Flemish labourer, being a merry, light-hearted soul, is merely noisy and jovial in a brutal sort of way



DUINHOEK

Interior of a Farmhouse.



in his cups; but let a quarrel arise, out come the knives, and before the rural policeman saunters along there are nasty rows, ending in wounds and sometimes in murder. When the lots are drawn for military service, and crowds of country lads with their friends flock into the towns, the public-houses do good business. Those who have drawn lucky numbers, and so escaped the conscription, get drunk out of joy; while those who find they must serve in the army drown their sorrow, or celebrate the occasion if they are of a martial turn, by reeling about the streets arm in arm with their companions, shouting and singing. Whole families, old and young alike, often join in these performances, and they must be very drunk and very disorderly before the police think of making even the mildest remonstrance.

The gay character of the Flemings is best seen at the 'kermesse,' or fair, which is held in almost every village during summer. At Bruges, Ypres, and Furnes, and still more in such large cities as Brussels or Antwerp, the kermesse has ceased to be typical of the country, and is supplanted by fairs such as may be seen in England or in almost any other country. 'Merry-go-rounds' driven by steam, elaborate circuses, menageries, waxwork

exhibitions, movable theatres, and modern 'shows' of every kind travel about, and settle for a few days, perhaps even for a few weeks, in various towns. The countryfolk of the surrounding district are delighted, and the showmen reap a goodly harvest of francs and centimes; but these fairs are tiresome and commonplace, much less amusing and lively than, for example, St. Giles's Fair at Oxford, though very nearly as noisy. But the kermesse proper, which still survives in some places, shows the Flemings amusing themselves in something more like the old fashion than anything which can be seen in the Market-Place of Bruges or on the boulevards of Brussels or Antwerp. Indeed, some of the village scenes, when the young people are dancing or shooting with bows and arrows at the mark, while the elders sit, with their mugs of beer and long pipes, watching and gossiping, are very like what took place in the times of the old painters who were so fond of producing pictures of the kermesses. The dress of the people, of course, is different, but the spirit of the scene, with its homely festivities, is wonderfully little changed.

About twenty miles from the French frontier is the town of Ypres, once the capital of Flanders, and which in the time of Louis of Nevers was one of

the three 'bonnes villes,' Bruges and Ghent being the others, which appointed deputies to defend the rights and privileges of the whole Flemish people.

As Bruges grew out of the rude fortress on the banks of the Roya, so Ypres developed from a stronghold built, probably about the year 900, on a small island in the river Yperlee. It was triangular in shape, with a tower at each corner, and was at first known by the inhabitants of the surrounding plain as the 'Castle of the Three Towers.' In course of time houses began to appear on the banks of the river near the island. A rampart of earth with a ditch defended these, and as the place grew, the outworks became more extensive. Owing to its strategic position, near France and in a part of Flanders which was constantly the scene of war, it was of great importance; and probably no other Flemish town has seen its defences so frequently altered and enlarged as Ypres has between the primitive days when the Crusading Thierry d'Alsace planted hedges of live thorns to strengthen the towers, and the reign of Louis XIV., when a vast and elaborate system of fortifications was constructed on scientific principles, under the direction of Vauban.

The citizens of Ypres took a prominent part in

most of the great events which distinguished the heroic period of Flemish history. In July, 1302, a contingent of 1,200 chosen men, '500 of them clothed in scarlet and the rest in black,' were set to watch the town and castle of Courtrai during the Battle of the Golden Spurs, and in the following year the victory was celebrated by the institution of the Confraternity of the Archers of St. Sebastian, which still exists at Ypres, the last survivor of the armed societies which flourished there during the Middle Ages. Seven hundred burghers of Ypres marched to Sluis, embarked in the Flemish boats which harassed the French fleet during the naval fight of June, 1340, and at the close of the campaign formed themselves into the Confraternity of St. Michael, which lasted till the French invasion of 1794. Forty years later we find no fewer than 5,000 of the men of Ypres, who had now changed their politics, on the French side at the Battle of Roosebeke, fighting in the thick mist upon the plain between Ypres and Roulers on that fatal day which saw the death of Philip van Artevelde and the triumph of the Leliarts.

Next year, so unceasingly did the tide of war flow over the plain of Flanders, an English army, commanded by Henry Spencer, Bishop of Norwich,



ADINKERQUE

At the Kermesse.



landed at Calais under the pretext of supporting the partisans of Pope Urban VI., who then occupied the Holy See, against the adherents of Pope Clement VII., who had established himself at Avignon. The burghers of Ghent flocked to the English standard, and the allies laid siege to Ypres, which was defended by the French and the Leliarts, who followed Louis of Maele, Count of Flanders, and maintained the cause of Clement.

At that time the gateways were the only part of the fortifications made of stone. The ramparts were of earth, planted on the exterior slope with a thick mass of thorn-bushes, interlaced and strengthened by posts. Outside there were more defences of wooden stockades, and beyond them two ditches, divided by a dyke, on which was a palisade of pointed stakes. The town, thus fortified, was defended by about 10,000 men, and on June 8, 1383, the siege was begun by a force consisting of 17,000 English and 20,000 Flemings of the national party, most of whom came from Bruges and Ghent.

The English had been told that the town would not offer a strong resistance, and on the first day of the siege 1,000 of them tried to carry it at once by assault. They were repulsed; and after that

assaults by the besiegers and sorties by the garrison continued day after day, the loss of life on both sides being very great. At last the besiegers, finding that they could not, in the face of the shower of arrows, javelins, and stones which met them, break through the palisades and the sharp thorn fences (those predecessors of the barbed-wire entanglements of to-day), force the gates, or carry the ramparts, built three wooden towers mounted on wheels, and pushed them full of soldiers up to the gates. But the garrison made a sortie, seized the towers, destroyed them, and killed or captured the soldiers who manned them.

Spencer on several occasions demanded the surrender of the town, but all his proposals were rejected. The English pressed closer and closer, but were repulsed with heavy losses whenever they delivered an assault. The hopes of the garrison rose high on August 7, the sixty-first day of the siege, when news arrived that a French army, 100,000 strong, accompanied by the forces of the Count of Flanders, was marching to the relief of Ypres. Early next morning the English made a fresh attempt to force their way into the town, but they were once more driven back. A little later in the day they twice advanced with the utmost

bravery. Again they were beaten back. So were the burghers of Ghent, whom the English reproached for having deceived them by saying that Ypres would fall in three days, and whose answer to this accusation was a furious attack on one of the gates, in which many of them fell. In the afternoon the English again advanced, and succeeded in forcing their way through part of the formidable thorn hedge; but it was of no avail, and once more they had to retire, leaving heaps of dead behind them. After a rest of some hours, another attack was made on seven different parts of the town at the same time. This assault was the most furious and bloody of the siege, but it was the last. Spencer saw that, in spite of the splendid courage of his soldiers and of the Flemish burghers, it would be impossible to take the town before the French army arrived, and during the night the English, with their allies from Ghent and Bruges, retired from before Ypres. The failure of this campaign left Flanders at the mercy of France; but the death of Count Louis of Maele, which took place in January, 1384, brought in the House of Burgundy, under whose rule the Flemings enjoyed a long period of prosperity and almost complete independence.

It was believed in Ypres that the town had been saved by the intercession of the Virgin Mary, its patron saint. In the Cathedral Church of St. Martin the citizens set up an image of Notre Dame-de-Thuine, that is, Our Lady of the Enclosures, an allusion to the strong barrier of thorns which had kept the enemy at bay; and a kermesse, appointed to be held on the first Sunday of August every year in commemoration of the siege, received the name of the 'Thuindag,' or Day of the Enclosures.* The people of Ypres, though they fought on the French side, had good reason to be proud of the way in which they defended their homes; but the consequences of the siege were disastrous, for the commerce of the town never recovered the loss of the large working-class population which left it at that time.

The religious troubles of the sixteenth century left their mark on Ypres as well as on the rest of Flanders. Everyone has read the glowing sentences in which the historian of the Dutch Republic describes the Cathedral of Antwerp, and tells how it was wrecked by the reformers during the image-breaking in the summer of 1566. What happened

* 'Thuin,' or 'tuin,' in Flemish means an enclosed space, such as a garden plot.





A FARMSTEADING



on the banks of the Scheldt appeals most to the imagination; but all over Flanders the statues and the shrines, the pictures and the stores of ecclesiastical wealth, with which piety, or superstition, or penitence had enriched so many churches and religious houses, became the objects of popular fury. There had been field-preaching near Ypres as early as 1562.* Other parts of West Flanders had been visited by the apostles of the New Learning, and on August 15, 1566, the reformers swept down upon Ypres and sacked the churches.

In the awful tragedy which soon followed, when Parma came upon the scene, that 'spectacle of human energy, human suffering, and human strength to suffer, such as has not often been displayed upon the stage of the world's events' the town had its share of the persecutions and exactions which followed the march of the Spanish soldiery; but for more than ten years a majority of the burghers adhered to the cause of Philip. In July, 1578, however, Ypres fell into the hands of the Protestants, and became their headquarters in West Flanders. Five years later Alexander of Parma besieged it. The siege lasted until April of the following year, when the Protestants, worn out by

* Motley, *Rise of the Dutch Republic*, part ii., chapter vi.

famine, capitulated, and the town was occupied by the Spaniards, who 'resorted to instant measures for cleansing a place which had been so long in the hands of the infidels, and, as the first step towards this purification, the bodies of many heretics who had been buried for years were taken from their graves and publicly hanged in their coffins. All living adherents to the Reformed religion were instantly expelled from the place.'* By this time the population was reduced to 5,000 souls, and the fortifications were a heap of ruins.

A grim memorial of those troublous times is still preserved at Ypres. The Place du Musée is a quiet corner of the town, where a Gothic house with double gables contains a collection of old paintings, medals, instruments of torture, and some other curiosities. It was the Bishop of Ypres who, at midnight on June 4, 1568, announced to Count Egmont, in his prison at Brussels, that his hour had come; and the cross-hilted sword, with its long straight blade, which hangs on the wall of the Museum is the sword with which the executioner 'severed his head from his shoulders at a single blow' on the following morning. The same

* Motley, *Rise of the Dutch Republic*, part ii., chapter vi.



YPRES

Place du Musée (showing Top Part of the Belfry).


SLAGTER

weapon, a few minutes later, was used for the despatch of Egmont's friend, Count Horn.

Before the end of that dismal sixteenth century Flanders regained some of the liberties for which so much blood had been shed; but while the Protestant Dutch Republic rose in the north, the 'Catholic' or 'Spanish' Netherlands in the south remained in the possession of Spain until the marriage of Philip's daughter Isabella to the Archduke Albert, when these provinces were given as a marriage portion to the bride. This was in 1599. Though happier times followed under the moderate rule of Albert and Isabella, war continued to be the incessant scourge of Flanders, and during the marching and countermarching of armies across this battlefield of Europe, Ypres scarcely ever knew what peace meant. Four times besieged and four times taken by the French in the wars of Louis XIV., the town had no rest; and for miles all round it the fields were scarred by the new system of attacking strong places which Vauban had introduced into the art of war. Louis, accompanied by Schomberg and Luxembourg, was himself present at the siege of 1678; and Ypres, having been ceded to France by the Treaty of Nimeguen in that year, was afterwards strengthened by forti-

fications constructed from plans furnished by the great French engineer.*

In the year 1689 Vauban speaks of Ypres as a place 'formerly great, populous, and busy, but much reduced by the frequent sedition and revolts of its inhabitants, and by the great wars which it has endured.' And in this condition it has remained ever since. Though the period which followed the Treaty of Rastadt in 1714, when Flanders passed into the possession of the Emperor Charles VI., and became a part of the 'Austrian Netherlands,' was a period of considerable improvement, Ypres never recovered its position, not even during the peaceful reign of the Empress Maria Theresa. The revolution against Joseph II. disturbed everything, and in June, 1794, the town yielded, after a short siege, to the army of the French Republic. The name of Flanders disappeared from the map of Europe. The whole of Belgium was divided, like France, with which it was now incorporated, into *départements*, Ypres being in the Department of the Lys. For twenty years, during the wars of the Republic, the Consulate, and the Empire, though the conscription was

* Letter from Vauban to Louvois on the fortifications of Ypres, 1689; Vereecke, pp. 325-357.

a constant drain upon the youth of Flanders, who went away to leave their bones on foreign soil, nothing happened to disturb the quiet of the town, and the fortifications were falling into decay when the return of Napoleon from Elba set Europe in a blaze. During the Hundred Days guns and war material were hurried over from England, the old defences were restored, and new works constructed by the English engineers ; but the Battle of Waterloo rendered these preparations unnecessary, and the military history of Ypres came to an end when the short-lived Kingdom of the Netherlands was established by the Congress of Vienna, though it was nominally a place of arms till 1852, when the fortifications were destroyed. Nowadays everything is very quiet and unwarlike The bastions and lunettes, the casemates and moats, which spread in every direction round the town, have almost entirely disappeared, and those parts of the fortifications which remain have been turned into ornamental walks.*

* The evolution of Ypres from a feudal tower on an island until it became a great fortress can be traced in a very interesting volume of maps and plans published by M. Vereecke in 1858, as a supplement to his *Histoire Militaire d'Ypres.* It shows the first defensive works, those erected by Vauban, the state of the fortifications between 1794 and 1814, and what the English engineers did in 1815.

But while so little remains of the works which were constructed, at such a cost and with so much labour, for the purposes of war, the arts of peace, which once flourished at Ypres, have left a more enduring monument. There is nothing in Bruges or any other Flemish town which can compare for massive grandeur with the pile of buildings at the west end of the Grand' Place of Ypres. During two centuries the merchants of Flanders, whose towns were the chief centres of Western commerce and civilization, grew to be the richest in Europe, and a great portion of the wealth which industry and public spirit had accumulated was spent in erecting those noble civic and commercial buildings which are still the glory of Flanders. The foundation-stone of the Halle des Drapiers, or Cloth Hall, of Ypres was laid by Baldwin of Constantinople, then Count of Flanders, at the beginning of the thirteenth century, but more than 100 years had passed away before it was completed. Though the name of the architect who began it is unknown, the unity of design which characterizes the work makes it probable that the original plans were adhered to till the whole was finished. Nothing could be simpler than the general idea; but the effect is very fine. The ground-floor of the façade, about 150

yards long, is pierced by a number of rectangular doors, over which are two rows of pointed windows, each exactly above the other, and all of the same style. In the upper row every second window is filled up, and contains the statue of some historical character. At each end there is a turret; and the belfry, a square with towers at the corners, rises from the centre of the building.

Various additions have been made from time to time to the original Halle des Drapiers since it was finished in the year 1304, and of these the 'Nieuwerck' is the most interesting. The east end of the Halle was for a long time hidden by a number of wooden erections, which, having been put up for various purposes after the main building was finished, were known as the 'Nieuwe wercken,' or new works. They were pulled down in the beginning of the seventeenth century, and replaced by the stone edifice, in the style of the Spanish Renaissance, which now goes by the name of the Nieuwerck, with its ten shapely arches supported by slender pillars, above whose sculptured capitals rise tiers of narrow windows and the steeply-pitched roof with gables of curiously carved stone. Ypres had ceased to be a great commercial city long before the Nieuwerck was built; but the Cloth

Hall was a busy place during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when Ypres shared with Bruges the responsibility of managing the Flemish branch of the Hanseatic League.

The extensive system of monopolies which the League maintained was, as a matter of course, the cause of much jealousy and bad feeling. In Flanders, Ghent, Bruges, and Ypres defended their own privileges against other towns, and quarrelled amongst themselves. The merchants of Ypres had a monopoly which forbade all weaving for three leagues round the town, under a penalty of fifty livres and confiscation of the looms and linen woven ; but the weavers in the neighbouring communes infringed this monopoly, and sold imitations of Ypres linen cloth on all hands. There was constant trouble between the people of Ypres and their neighbours at Poperinghe. Sometimes the weavers of Ypres, to enforce their exclusive privileges, marched in arms against Poperinghe, and sometimes the men of Poperinghe retaliated by attacking their powerful rivals. Houses were burnt, looms were broken up, and lives were lost in these struggles, which were so frequent that for a long time something like a chronic state of war existed between the two places.



YPRES

Arcade under the Nieuwerk.



Besides the troubles caused by the jealousy of other towns, intestine disputes arising out of the perpetual contest between labour and capital went on from year to year within the walls of Ypres. There, as in the other Flemish towns, a sharp line was drawn between the working man, by whose hands the linen was actually woven, and the merchants, members of the Guilds, by whom it was sold. In these towns, which maintained armies and made treaties of peace, and whose friendship was sought by princes and statesmen, the artisans, whose industry contributed so much to the importance of the community, resented any infringement of their legal rights. By law the magistrates of Ypres were elected annually, and because this had not been done in 1361 the people rose in revolt against the authorities. The mob invaded the Hôtel de Ville, where the magistrates were assembled. The Baillie, Jean Deprysenaere, trusting to his influence as the local representative of the Count of Flanders, left the council chamber, and tried to appease the rioters. He was set upon and killed. Then the crowd rushed into the council chamber, seized the other magistrates, and locked them up in the belfry, where they remained prisoners for some days. The leaders of the revolt met, and resolved to kill their

prisoners, and this sentence was executed on the Burgomaster and two of the Sheriffs, who were beheaded in front of the Halle in the presence of their colleagues.* It was by such stern deeds that the fierce democracy of the Flemish communes preserved their rights.

Each town, however, stood for itself alone. The idea of government by the populace on the market-place was common to them all, but they were kept apart by the exclusive spirit of commercial jealousy. The thirst for material prosperity consumed them; but they had no bond of union, and each was ready to advance its own interests at the expense of its rivals. Therefore, either in the face of foreign invasion, or when the policy of some Count led to revolt and civil war, it was seldom that the people of Flanders were united. 'L'Union fait la Force' is the motto of modern Belgium, but in the Middle Ages there was no powerful central authority round which the communes rallied. Hence the spectacle of Ghent helping an English army to storm the ramparts of Ypres, or of the Guildsmen of Bruges girding on their swords to strike a blow for Count Louis of Maele against the White Hoods who marched from Ghent.

* Vereecke, p. 41.

Hence the permanent unrest of these Flemish towns, the bickerings and the sheddings of blood, the jealousy of trade pitted against trade or of harbour against harbour, the insolence in the hour of triumph and the abject submission in the hour of defeat, and all the evils which discord brought upon the country. No town suffered more than Ypres from the distracted state of Flanders, which, combined with the ravages of war and the religious dissensions of the sixteenth century, reduced it from the first rank amongst the cities of the Netherlands to something very like the condition of a quiet country town in an out-of-the-way corner of England. That is what the Ypres of to-day is like—a sleepy country town, with clean, well-kept streets, dull and uninteresting save for the stately Cloth Hall, which stands there a silent memorial of the past.

FURNES—THE PROCESSION OF PENITENTS

16

CHAPTER VIII

FURNES—THE PROCESSION OF PENITENTS

The traveller wandering amongst the towns and villages in this corner of West Flanders is apt to feel that he is on a kind of sentimental journey as he moves from place to place, and finds himself everywhere surrounded by things which belong to the past rather than to the present. The very guide-books are eloquent if we read between the lines. This place 'was formerly of much greater importance.' That 'was formerly celebrated for its tapestries.' From this Hôtel de Ville 'the numerous statuettes with which the building was once embellished have all disappeared.' The tower of that church has been left unfinished for the last 500 years. 'Fuimus' might be written on them all. And so, some twenty miles north of Ypres, on a plain which in the seventeenth century was so studded with earthen redoubts and serrated by long lines of field-works and ditches that the whole countryside between Ypres and Dunkirk

was virtually one vast entrenched camp, we come to the town of Furnes, another of the places on which time has laid its heavy hand.

The early history of Furnes is obscure, though it is generally supposed to have grown up round a fortress erected by Baldwin Bras-de-Fer to check the inroads of the Normans. It suffered much, like its neighbours, from wars and revolutions,* and is now one of the quietest of the Flemish towns. The market-place is a small square, quaintly picturesque, surrounded by clusters of little brick houses with red and blue tiled roofs, low-stepped gables, and deep mouldings round the windows. Behind these dwelling-places the bold flying buttresses of the Church of Ste. Walburge, whose relics were brought to Furnes by Judith, wife of Baldwin Bras-de-Fer, and the tower of St. Nicholas, lift themselves on the north and east; and close together in a corner to the west are the dark gray Hôtel de Ville and Palais de Justice, in

* 'Furnes était devenue un *oppidium*, aux termes d'une charte de 1183, qui avait à se défendre à la fois contre les incursions des étrangers et les attaques d'une population "indocile et cruelle," comme l'appelle l'Abbé de Saint Riquier Hariulf, toujours déchirée par les factions et toujours prête à la révolte.'—Gilliodts van Severen : *Recueil des Anciennes Coutumes de la Belgique ; Quartier de Furnes*, vol. i., p. 28.



FURNES

Grand' Place and Belfry.



a room of which the judges of the Inquisition used to sit.

Though some features are common to nearly all the Flemish towns — the market-place, the belfry, the Hôtel de Ville, the old gateways, and the churches, with their cherished paintings—yet each of them has generally some association of its own. In Bruges we think of how the merchants bought and sold, how the gorgeous city rose, clothed itself in all the colours of the rainbow, glittered for a time, and sank in darkness. In the crowded streets of modern Ghent, the busy capital of East Flanders, we seem to catch a glimpse of bold Jacques van Artevelde shouldering his way up to the Friday Market, or of turbulent burghers gathering there to set Pope, or Count of Flanders, or King of Spain at defiance. Ypres and its flat meadows suggest one of the innumerable paintings of the Flemish wars, the ‘battle-pieces’ in which the Court artists took such pride: the town walls with ditch and glacis before them, and within them the narrow-fronted houses, and the flag flying from steeple or belfry; the clumsy cannon puffing out clouds of smoke; the King of France capering on a fat horse and holding up his baton in an attitude of command in the foreground; and in the distance the tents of

the camp, where the travelling theatre was set up, and the musicians fiddled, and an army of serving-men waited on the rouged and powdered ladies who had followed the army into Flanders.

Furnes, somehow, always recalls the Spanish period. The Hôtel de Ville, a very beautiful example of the Renaissance style, with its rare hangings of Cordovan leather and its portraits of the Archduke Albert and his bride, the Infanta Isabella, is scarcely changed since it was built soon after the death of Philip II. The Corps de Garde Espagnol and the Pavillon des Officiers Espagnols in the market-place, once the head-quarters of the whiskered bravos who wrought such ills to Flanders, are now used by the Municipal Council of the town as a museum and a public library; but the stones of this little square were often trodden by the persecutors, with their guards and satellites, in the years when Peter Titelmann the Inquisitor stalked through the fields of Flanders, torturing and burning in the name of the Catholic Church and by authority of the Holy Office. The spacious room in which the tribunal of the Inquisition sat is nowadays remarkable only for its fine proportions and venerable appearance; but, though it was not erected until after the Spanish



FURNES

Peristyle of Town Hall and Palais de Justice.



fury had spent its force, and at a time when wiser methods of government had been introduced, it reminds us of the days when the maxims of Torquemada were put in force amongst the Flemings by priests more wicked and merciless than any who could be found in Spain. And in the market-place the people must often have seen the dreadful procession by means of which the Church sought to strike terror into the souls of men. Those public orgies of clerical intolerance were the suitable consummation of the crimes which had been previously committed in the private conclave of the Inquisitors. The burning or strangling of a heretic was not accompanied by so much pomp and circumstance in small towns like Furnes as in the great centres, where multitudes, led by the highest in the land, were present to enjoy the spectacle; but the Inquisition of the Netherlands, under which Flanders groaned for so many years, was, as Philip himself once boasted, 'much more pitiless than that of Spain.'

The groans of the victims will never more be heard in the torture-chamber, nor will crowds assemble in the market-place to watch the cortège of the *auto-da-fé;* but every year the famous Procession of Penitents, which takes place on the

last Sunday of July, draws many strangers to Furnes.

It is said in Bruges that the ghost of a Spanish soldier, condemned to expiate eternally a foul crime done at the bidding of the Holy Office, walks at midnight on the Quai Vert, like Hamlet's father on the terrace at Elsinore ; and superstitious people might well fancy that a spectre appears in the market-place of Furnes on the summer's night when the town is preparing for the annual ceremony. The origin of the procession was this : In the year 1650 a soldier named Mannaert, only twenty-two years old, being in garrison at Furnes, went to Confession and Communion in the Chapel of the Capucins. After he had received the consecrated wafer, he was persuaded by one of his comrades, Mathurin Lejeusne, to take it out of his mouth, wrap it in a cloth, and, on returning to his lodging, fry it over a fire, under the delusion that by reducing it to powder he would make himself invulnerable. The young man was arrested, confessed his guilt, and himself asked for punishment. Condemned to be strangled, he heard the sentence without a murmur, and went to his death singing the penitential psalms. Soon afterwards Mathurin Lejeusne, the instigator of the sacrilege, was shot



NIEUPORT

Interior of Church.



for some breach of military duty. This was regarded as a proof of Divine justice, and the citizens resolved that something must be done to appease the wrath of God, which they feared would fall upon their town because of the outrage done, as they believed, to the body of His Son. A society calling itself the 'Confrèrie de la Sodalité du Sauveur Crucifié et de la Sainte Mère Marie, se trouvant en douleur dessous la Croix, sur Mont Calvaire,' had been formed a few years before at Furnes, and the members now decided that a Procession of Penitents should walk through the streets every summer and represent to the people the story of the Passion.

Though the procession at Furnes is a thing of yesterday compared to the Procession of the Holy Blood at Bruges, it is far more suggestive of mediævalism. The hooded faces of the penitents, the quaint wooden figures representing Biblical characters, the coarse dresses, the tawdry colours, the strangely weird arrangement of the whole business, take us back into the monkish superstitions of the Dark Ages, with their mystery plays. It is best seen from one of the windows of the Spanish House, or from the balcony of the Hôtel de Ville, on a sultry day, when the sky is heavy

with black clouds, and thunder growls over the plain of Flanders, and hot raindrops fall now and then into the muddy streets. The first figure which appears is a veiled penitent bearing the standard of the Sodality. Then come, one after another, groups of persons representing various scenes in the Bible story, each group preceded by a penitent carrying an inscription to explain what follows. Abraham with his sword conducts Isaac to the sacrifice on Mount Moriah. A penitent holding the serpent and the cross walks before Moses. Two penitents wearily drag a car on which Joseph and Mary are seen seated in the stable at Bethlehem. The four shepherds and the three Magi follow. Then comes the flight into Egypt, with Mary on an ass led by Joseph, the infant Christ in her arms. Later we see the doctors of the Temple walking in two rows, disputing with the young Jesus in their midst. The triumphal entry into Jerusalem is represented by a crowd of schoolchildren waving palm-branches and singing hosannahs round Jesus mounted on an ass. The agony in the garden, Peter denying his Lord and weeping bitterly, Jesus crowned with thorns, Pilate in his judgment-hall, the Saviour staggering beneath the cross, the Crucifixion itself, the Resurrection



FURNES

Tower of St. Nicholas.



and the Ascension, are all shown with the crude realism of the Middle Ages. There are penitents bearing ponderous crosses on their shoulders, or carrying in their hands the whips, the nails, the thorns, the veil of the Temple rent in twain, a picture of the darkened sun, and other symbols of the Passion. At the end, amidst torches and incense and solemn chanting, the Host is exhibited for the adoration of the crowd.

Much of this spectacle is grotesque, and even ludicrous; but there is also a great deal that is terribly real, for the penitents are not actors playing a part, but are all persons who have come to Furnes for the purpose of doing penance. They are disguised by the dark brown robes which cover them from head to foot, so that they can see their way only through the eyeholes in the hoods which hide their faces; but as they pass silently along, bending under the heavy crosses, or holding out before them scrolls bearing such words as, 'All they that see Me laugh Me to scorn,' 'They pierced My hands and My feet,' or, 'See if there be any sorrow like unto My sorrow,' there are glimpses of delicate white hands grasping the hard wood of the crosses, and of small, shapely feet bare in the mud. What sighs, what tears and vain

regrets, what secret tragedies of passion, guilt, remorse, may not be concealed amongst the doleful company who tread their own Via Dolorosa on that pilgrimage of sorrow through the streets of Furnes!

FURNES

In St. Walburge's Church.



NIEUPORT—THE BATTLE OF THE DUNES

CHAPTER IX

NIEUPORT—THE BATTLE OF THE DUNES

On the morning of July 2, in the year 1600, two armies—Spaniards, under the Archduke Albert, and Dutchmen, under Prince Maurice of Nassau—stood face to face amongst the dunes near Nieuport, where the river Yser falls into the sea about ten miles west from Ostend.

In a field to the east of Nieuport there is a high, square tower, part of a monastery and church erected by the Templars in the middle of the twelfth century, which, though it escaped complete destruction, was set on fire and nearly consumed when the town was attacked and laid in ruins by the English and the burghers of Ghent in 1383, the year of their famous siege of Ypres. It is now in a half-ruinous condition, but in July, 1600, it was an important part of the fortifications, and from the top the watchmen of the Spanish garrison could see the country all round to a great distance beyond the broad moat which then surrounded the strong walls

of Nieuport. A few miles inland, to the south-west, in the middle of the plain of Flanders, were the houses of Furnes, grouped round the church tower of St. Nicholas. To the north a wide belt of sandhills (the 'dunes'), with the sea beyond them, extended far past Ostend on the east, and to the harbour of Dunkirk on the west. Nearer, on the landward side of the dunes to the east, and within less than a mile of each other, were the villages of Westende and Lombaerdzyde. Close at hand, all round Nieuport, there were numerous small lakes and watercourses connected with the channel of the Yser, which, flowing past the town, widened out until it joined the sea, and became a harbour, which on that morning was full of shipping.

A new chapter had just begun in the history of West Flanders when the Dutchmen and the Spaniards thus met to slaughter each other amongst the sand and rushes of the dunes. Philip II. had offered to cede the Spanish Netherlands to his daughter, the Infanta Isabella, on condition that a marriage was arranged between her and the Arch-duke Albert of Austria. After the death of Philip II. this offer was confirmed by his successor, Philip III., and the wedding took place in April, 1599.



NIEUPORT

A Fair Parishioner.



Albert and Isabella were both entering on the prime of life, the Archduke being forty and the Infanta thirty-two at the time of their marriage, and were both of a character admirably fitted for the lofty station to which they had been called. In their portraits, which hang, very often frayed and tarnished, on the walls of the Hôtel de Ville of many a Flemish town, there is nothing very royal or very attractive; but, even after making every allowance for the flattery of contemporary historians, there can be little doubt that their popularity was well deserved—well deserved if even a part of what has been said about them is true. The Archduke is always said to have taken Philip II. as a model of demeanour, but he had none of the worst faults of the sullen, powerful despot, with that small mind, that 'incredibly small' mind of his, and cold heart, cold alike to human suffering and human love, who had held the Flemings, whom he hated, for so many years in the hollow of his hand. His grave mien and reserved habits, probably acquired during his sojourn at the Court of Spain, were distasteful to the gay and pleasure-loving people of Flanders, who would have preferred a Prince more like Charles V., whose versatility enabled him to adapt himself to the customs

of each amongst the various races over whom he ruled. Nevertheless, if they did not love him they respected him, and were grateful for the moderation and good feeling which distinguished his reign, and gave their distracted country, after thirty years of civil war, a period of comparative tranquillity.

The Infanta Isabella, *débonnaire*, affable, tolerant, and noble-hearted, as she is described, gained the hearts of the Flemings as her husband never did. 'One could not find any Court more truly royal or more brilliant in its public fêtes, which sometimes recall the splendid epoch of the House of Burgundy. Isabella loves a country life. She is often to be seen on horseback, attending the tournaments, leading the chase, flying the hawk, taking part in the sports of the bourgeoise, shooting with the crossbow, and carrying off the prize.' Above all things, her works of charity endeared her to the people. In time of war she established hospitals for the wounded, for friends and enemies alike, where she visited them, nursed them, and dressed their wounds with her own hands, with heroic courage and tenderness.*

Even on their first coming into Flanders, before their characters were known except by hearsay,

* De Gerlache, i. 260.



NIEUPORT

Hall and Vicarage.



they were received with extraordinary enthusiasm. Travelling by way of Luxembourg, they came to Namur, where their first visit was made the occasion of a military fête, conducted under the personal supervision of Comte Florent de Berlaimont. At Nivelles the Duc d'Arschot paid out of his own purse the cost of the brilliant festivities to which the people of Brabant flocked in order to bid their new rulers welcome, and himself led the procession, accompanied by the Archbishop of Malines and the Bishop of Antwerp. So they journeyed on amidst scenes of public rejoicing until they came to Brussels, where they established their Court in accordance with the customs and ceremonies which had been usual under the Dukes of Burgundy and the Kings of Spain.

But when the Archdukes, as they were called, passed from town to town on this Royal progress, the phantoms of war, pestilence, and famine hung over the land. The great cities of Flanders had been deserted by thousands of their inhabitants. The sea trade of the country had been destroyed by the vigorous blockade which the Dutch ships of war maintained along the coast. Religious intolerance had driven the most industrious of the working classes to find a refuge in Holland or England.

Villages lay in ruins, surrounded by untilled fields and gardens run to seed. Silent looms and empty warehouses were seen on every side. To such a pass had the disastrous policy of the Escurial brought this fair province of the Spanish Empire! From all parts of Flanders the cry for peace went up, but the time for peace was not yet come.*

The new reign had just begun when Maurice of Nassau suddenly invaded Flanders with a great force, and laid siege to Nieuport, the garrison of which, reinforced by an army, at the head of which the Archduke Albert had hurried across Flanders, was under the command of the Archduke himself, and many Spanish Generals of great experience in the wars.

Though the Court at Brussels had been taken by surprise, the Dutch army was in a position of great danger. Part of it lay on the west side of the Yser, and part to the east, amongst the dunes near Lombaerdzyde and Westende, with a bridge of boats thrown across the river as their only connection. Their ships were at anchor close to the shore; but Prince Maurice frankly told his men that it was useless to think of embarking in case of defeat, and that, therefore, they must either win

* *L'Abbé Nameche*, xxi. 6-8.



NIEUPORT

The Quay, with Eel-boats and Landing-stages.



the day or perish there, for the Spaniards were before them under the protection of Nieuport, the river divided them, the sea was behind them, and it would be impossible for a beaten army to escape by retreating through the dunes in the direction of Ostend.

Such was the position of affairs beneath the walls of Nieuport at sunrise on July 2, 1600. The morning was spent by the Dutch in preparing for battle. Towards noon the Spanish leaders held a council of war, at which it was decided to attack the enemy as soon as possible, and about three o'clock the battle began. A stiff breeze from the west, blowing up the English Channel, drove clouds of sand into the eyes of the Spaniards, and the bright rays of the afternoon sun, shining in their faces as they advanced to the attack, dazzled and confused them. But, in spite of these disadvantages, it seemed at first as if the fortunes of the day were to go in their favour.

The bridge of boats across the Yser was broken, and some of the Dutch regiments, seized by a sudden panic, began to retreat towards the sea; but, finding it impossible to reach the ships, they rallied, and began once more to fight with all the dogged courage of their race. For some hours the battle was continued with equal bravery on both

sides, the Spaniards storming a battery which the Dutch had entrenched amongst the dunes, and the Dutch defending it so desperately that the dead and wounded lay piled in heaps around it. But at last the Spanish infantry were thrown into confusion by a charge of horsemen; the Archduke Albert was wounded, and had to retire from the front to have his injuries attended to. Prince Maurice ordered a general advance of all his army, and in a few minutes the enemy were fleeing from the battlefield, leaving behind them 3,000 dead, 800 prisoners, and more than 100 standards. The loss on the Dutch side was about 2,000.

The Archduke Albert, who had narrowly escaped being himself taken prisoner, succeeded in entering Nieuport safely with what remained of his army. The town remained in the hands of the Spaniards, for Prince Maurice, after spending some days in vain attempts to capture it, marched with his whole force to Ostend, where soon afterwards began the celebrated siege, which was to last for three long years, and about which all Europe never tired of talking.*

* 'Le siège d'Ostende fut, pendant ces trois ans, la fable et la nouvelle de l'Europe; on ne se lassait pas d'en parler. Des princes, des étrangers de toutes les nations venaient y assister.'—*L'Abbé Nameche*, xxi. 24.



NIEUPORT

The Town Hall.



The history of Nieuport since those days has been the history of a gradual fall. Its sea trade disappeared slowly but surely; the fishing industry languished; the population decreased year by year; and it has not shared to any appreciable extent in the prosperity which has enriched other parts of Flanders since the Revolution of 1830. It is now a quiet, sleepy spot, with humble streets, which remind one of some fishing village on the east coast of Scotland. Men and women sit at the doors mending nets or preparing bait. The boats, with their black hulls and dark brown sails, move lazily up to the landing-stages, where a few small craft, trading along the coast, lie moored. Barges heavily laden with wood are pulled laboriously through the locks of the canals which connect the Yser with Ostend and Furnes. The ancient fortifications have long since disappeared, with the exception of a few grass-grown mounds; and only the grim tower of the Templars, standing by itself in a field on the outskirts of the town, remains to show that this insignificant place was once a mighty stronghold.

In those old Flemish towns, however, it is always possible to find something picturesque; and here we have the Cloth Hall, with its low arches open-

ing on the market-place, and the Gothic church, one of the largest in Flanders, with its porch and tower, where the bell-ringers play the chimes and the people pass devoutly to the services of the church. But that is all. Nieuport has few attractions nowadays, and is chiefly memorable in Flemish history because under its walls they fought that bloody 'Battle of the Dunes,' in which the stubborn strength and obstinacy of the Dutch overcame the fiery valour of the Spaniards.

They are all well-nigh forgotten now, obstinate Dutchman and valiant Spaniard alike. Amongst the dunes not a vestige remains of the field-works for which they fought. Bones, broken weapons and shattered breastplates, and all the débris of the fight, were long ago buried fathoms deep beneath mounds of drifting sand. Old Nieuport—Nieuport Ville, as they call it now—for which so much blood was shed, is desolate and dreary with its small industries and meagre commerce; but a short walk to the north brings us to Nieuport-Bains, and to the gay summer life which pulsates all along the Flemish coast, from La Panne on the west to the frontiers of Holland.



NIEUPORT

Church Porch (Evensong).


A FORESTIER

THE COAST OF FLANDERS

CHAPTER X

THE COAST OF FLANDERS

To walk from Nieuport Ville to the Digue de Mer at Nieuport-Bains is to pass in a few minutes from the old Flanders, the home of so much romance, the scene of so many stirring deeds, from the market-places with the narrow gables heaped up in piles around them, from the belfries soaring to the sky, from the winding streets and the narrow lanes, in which the houses almost touch each other' from the tumble-down old hostelries, from the solemn aisles where the candles glimmer and the dim red light glows before the altar, from the land of Bras-de-Fer, and Thierry d'Alsace, and Memlinc, and Van Eyck, and Rubens, the land which was at once the Temple and the Golgotha of Europe, into the clear, broad light of modern days.

The Flemish coast, from the frontiers of France to the frontiers of Holland, is throughout the same in appearance. The sea rolls in and breaks upon the yellow beach, which extends from east to west

for some seventy kilometres in an irregular line, unbroken by rocks or cliffs. Above the beach are the dunes, a long range of sandhills, tossed into all sorts of queer shapes by the wind, on which nothing grows but rushes or stunted Lombardy poplars, and which reach their highest point, the Hoogen-Blekker, about 100 feet above the sea, near Coxyde, a fishing village four or five miles from Nieuport. Behind the dunes a strip of undulating ground ('Ter Streep'), seldom more than a bare mile in width, covered with scanty vegetation, moss, and bushes, connects the barren sandhills with the cultivated farms, green fields, and woodlands of the Flemish plain. On the other side of the Channel the chalk cliffs and rocky coast of England have kept the waves in check; but the dunes were, for many long years, the only barrier against the encroachments of the sea on Flanders. They are, however, a very weak defence against the storms of autumn and winter. The sand drifts like snow before the wind, and the outlines of these miniature mountain ranges change often in a single night. At one time, centuries ago, this part of Flanders, which is now so bare, was, it is pretty clear, covered by forests, the remains of which are still sometimes found beneath the subsoil inland and under the sea.



THE DUNES

A Stormy Evening.



When the great change came is unknown, but the process was probably gradual. At an early period, here, as in Holland, the fight against the invasions of the sea began, and the first dykes are said to have been constructed in the tenth century. The first was known as the Evendyck, and ran from Heyst to Wenduyne. Others followed, but they were swept away, and now only a few traces of them are to be found, buried beneath the sand and moss.*

The wild storms of the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries changed the aspect of the coast of Flanders. Nieuport rose in consequence of one of these convulsions of Nature, when the inhabitants of Lombaerdzyde, which was then a seaport, were driven by the tempests to the inland village of Santhoven, the name of which they changed to 'Neoportus'—the new harbour. This was in the beginning of the twelfth century, and thenceforth the struggle against the waves went on incessantly. Lands were granted by Thierry d'Alsace on condition that the owner should construct dykes, and Baldwin of Constantinople appointed guardians of the shore, charged with the duty of watching the

* Bortier, *Le Littoral de la Flandre au IX^e^ et au XIX^e^ Siècles.*

sea and constructing defensive works. But the struggle was carried on under the utmost difficulties. In the twelfth century the sea burst in with resistless force upon the low-lying ground, washing away the dunes and swallowing up whole towns. The inroads of the waves, the heavy rains, and the earthquakes, made life so unendurable that there were thousands who left their homes and emigrated to Germany.

Later, in the thirteenth century, there was a catastrophe of appalling dimensions, long known as the 'Great Storm,' when 40,000 Flemish men and women perished. This was the same tempest which overran the Dutch coast, and formed the Zuyder Zee, those 1,400 square miles of water which the Dutch are about to reclaim and form again into dry land. In the following century the town of Scarphout, in West Flanders, was overwhelmed, and the inhabitants built a new town for themselves on higher ground, and called it Blankenberghe, which is now one of the most important watering-places on the coast.

Ever since those days this constant warfare against the storms has continued, and the sea appears to be bridled; but anyone who has watched the North Sea at high tide on a stormy day beating

on the shores of Flanders, and observed how the dunes yield to the pressure of the wind and waves, and crumble away before his eyes, must come to the conclusion that the peril of the ocean is not yet averted, and can understand the meaning of the great modern works, the *digues de mer*, or sea-fronts, as they would be called in England, which are being gradually constructed at such immense cost all along the coast.

A most interesting and, indeed, wonderful thing in the recent history of the Netherlands is the rapid development of the Flemish littoral from a waste of sand, with here and there a paltry fishing hamlet and two or three small towns, into a great cosmopolitan pleasure resort. Seventy-five years ago, when Belgium became an independent country, and King Leopold I. ascended the throne, Ostend and Nieuport were the only towns upon the coast which were of any size; but Ostend was then a small fortified place, with a harbour wholly unsuited for modern commerce, and Nieuport, in a state of decadence, though it possessed a harbour, was a place of no importance. To-day the whole coast is studded with busy watering-places, about twenty of them, most of which have come into existence within the last fifteen years, with a resi-

dent population of about 60,000, which is raised by visitors in summer to, it is said, nearly 125,000. The dunes, which the old Counts of Flanders fought so hard to preserve from the waves, and which were at the beginning of the present century mere wastes of sand, a sort of 'no man's land,' of little or no use except for rabbit-shooting, are now valuable properties, the price of which is rising every year.

The work of turning the sand into gold, for that is what the development of the Flemish coast comes to, has been carried out partly by the State and partly by private persons. In early times this belt of land upon the margin of the sea was held by the Counts of Flanders, who treated the ridge of sandhills above high-water mark as a natural rampart against the waves, and granted large tracts of the flat ground which lay behind to various religious houses. At the French Revolution these lands were sold as Church property at a very low figure, and were afterwards allowed, in many cases, to fall out of cultivation by the purchasers. So great a portion of the district was sold that at the present time only a small portion of the dune land is the property of the State—the narrow strip between Mariakerke and Middelkerke on the west of

AN OLD FARMER



Ostend, and that which lies between Ostend and Blankenberghe on the east. The larger portions, which are possessed by private owners, are partly the property of the descendants of those who bought them at the Revolution, and partly of building societies, incorporated for the purpose of developing what Mr. Hall Caine once termed the 'Visiting Industry'—that is to say, the trade in tourists and seaside visitors.*

Plage de Westende, Le Coq, and Duinbergen—three charming summer resorts—have been created by building societies. Nieuport-Bains and La Panne have been developed by the owners of the adjoining lands, the families of Crombez and Calmeyn. Wenduyne, on the other hand, which lies between Le Coq and Blankenberghe, has been made by the State, while the management of Blankenberghe, Heyst, and Middelkerke, as bathing stations, is in the hands of their communal councils.

On the coast of Flanders, Ostend—'La Reine des Plages'—is, it need hardly be said, the most important place, and its rise has been very remarkable. Less than fifty years ago the population was in all about 15,000. During the last fifteen years it has increased by nearly 15,000, and now amounts

* Letter to the Manx Reform League, November, 1903.

to about 40,000 in round numbers. The increase in the number of summer visitors has been equally remarkable. In the year 1860 the list of strangers contained 9,700 names; three years ago it contained no less than 42,000. This floating population of foreign visitors who come to Ostend is cosmopolitan to an extent unknown at any watering-place in England. In 1902 11,000 English, 8,000 French, 5,000 Germans, and 2,000 Americans helped to swell the crowds who walked on the sea-front, frequented the luxurious and expensive hotels, or left their money on the gaming-tables at the Kursaal. On one day—August 15, 1902—7,000 persons bathed.*

Blankenberghe, with its 30,000 summer visitors, comes next in importance to Ostend, while both Heyst and Middelkerke are crowded during the season. But the life at these towns is not so agreeable as at the smaller watering-places. The hotels are too full, and have, as a rule, very little except their cheapness to recommend them. There is usually a body calling itself the *comité des fêtes*,

* I give these figures on the authority of M. Paul Otlet, Advocate, of Brussels, to whom I am indebted for much information regarding the development of the coast of Flanders. See also an article by M. Otlet in *Le Cottage*, May 15 to June 15, 1904.

the members of which devote themselves for two months every summer to devising amusements, sports, and competitions of various kinds, instead of leaving people to amuse themselves in their own way, so that hardly a day passes on which the strains of a second-rate band are not heard in the local Kursaal, or a night which is not made hideous by a barrel-organ, to which the crowd is dancing on the *digue.* At the smaller places, however, though these also have their *comités des fêtes*, one escapes to a great extent from these disagreeable surroundings.

May, June, and September are the pleasantest months upon the coast of Flanders, for the visitors are not so numerous, and even in mid-winter the dunes are worth a visit. Then the hotels and villas fronting the sea are closed, and their windows boarded up. The bathing-machines are removed from the beach, and stand in rows in some sheltered spot. The *digue*, a broad extent of level brickwork, is deserted, and the wind sweeps along it, scattering foam and covering it with sand and sprays of tangled seaweed. The mossy surface of the dunes is frozen hard as iron, and often the hailstones rush in furious blasts before the wind. For league after league there is not a sign of life, except the sea-

birds flying low near the shore, or the ships rising and falling in the waves far out to sea. In the winter months the coast of Flanders is bleak and stormy, but the air in these solitudes is as health-giving as in any other part of Europe.

Of late years the Government, represented by Comte de Smet de Naeyer, has bestowed much attention on the development of the littoral, and King Leopold II. has applied his great business talents to the subject. Large sums of money have been voted by the Belgian Parliament for the construction of public works and the extension of the means of communication from place to place. There is a light railway, the 'Vicinal,' which runs along the whole coast, at a short distance from the shore, from Knocke, on the east, to La Panne in the extreme west, and which is connected with the system of State railways at various points. From Ostend, through Middelkerke, to Plage de Westende, an electric railway has been constructed, close to the beach and parallel to the Vicinal (which is about a mile inland), on which trains run every ten minutes during the summer season. As an instance of the speed and energy with which these works for the convenience of the public are carried out, when once they have been decided upon, it may be



LA PANNE

Interior of a Flemish Inn.



mentioned that the contract for the portion of the electric line between Middelkerke and Plage de Westende, a distance of about a mile and a half, was signed on May 9, that five days later 200 workmen began to cut through the dunes, embank and lay the permanent way, and that on June 25, in spite of several interruptions owing to drifting sand and heavy rains, the first train of the regular service arrived at Plage de Westende.

A large sum, amounting to several millions of francs, is voted every year for the protection of the shores of Flanders against the encroachments of the sea, by the construction of these solid embankments of brickwork and masonry, which will, in the course of a few years, extend in an unbroken line along the whole coast from end to end. The building of these massive sea-walls is a work of great labour and expense, for what seems to be an impregnable embankment, perhaps 30 feet high and 90 feet broad, solid and strong enough to resist the most violent breakers, will be undermined and fall to pieces in a few hours, if not made in the proper way. A *digue*, no matter how thick, which rests on the sand alone will not last. A thick bed of green branches bound together must first be laid down as a foundation: this is strengthened by posts

driven through it into the sand. Heavy timbers, resting on bundles of branches lashed together, are wedged into the foundations, and slope inwards and upwards to within a few feet of the height to which it is intended to carry the *digue*. On the top another solid bed of branches is laid down, and the whole is first covered with concrete, and then with bricks or tiles, while the edge of the *digue*, at the top of the seaward slope, is composed of heavy blocks of stone cemented together and bound by iron rivets.

Digues made in this solid fashion, all of them higher above the shore than the Thames Embankment is above the river, and some of them broader than the Embankment, will, before very many years have passed, stretch along the whole coast of Flanders without a break, and will form not only a defence against the tides, but a huge level promenade, with the dunes on one side and the sea on the other. This is a gigantic undertaking, but it will be completed during the lifetime of the present generation.

Another grandiose idea, which is actually being carried into effect, is to connect all the seaside resorts on the coast of Flanders by a great boulevard, 40 yards wide, with a road for carriages and



LA PANNE

A Flemish Inn—Playing Skittles.


IN DE KLOK

pedestrians, a track for motor-cars and bicycles, and an electric railway, all side by side. Large portions of this magnificent roadway, which is to be known as the 'Route Royale,' have already been completed between Blankenberghe and Ostend, and from Ostend to Plage de Westende. From Westende it will be continued to Nieuport-Bains, crossing the Yser by movable bridges, and thence to La Panne, and so onwards, winding through the dunes, over the French borders, and perhaps as far as Paris!

A single day's journey through the district which this 'Route Royale' is to traverse will lead the traveller through the most interesting part of the dunes, and introduce him to most of the favourite *plages* on the coast of Flanders, and thus give him an insight into many characteristic Flemish scenes. La Panne, for instance, and Adinkerque, in the west and on the confines of France, are villages inhabited by fishermen who have built their dwellings in sheltered places amongst the dunes. The low white cottages of La Panne, with the strings of dried fish hanging on the walls, nestle in the little valley from which the place takes its name (for *panne* in Flemish means 'a hollow'), surrounded by trees and hedges, gay with wild roses in the summer-time. Each cottage stands in

its small plot of garden ground, and most of the families own fishing-boats of their own, and farm a holding which supplies them with potatoes and other vegetables.

For a long time these cottages were the only houses at La Panne, which was seldom visited, except by a few artists; but about fifteen years ago the surveyors and the architects made their appearance, paths and roads were laid out, and, as if by magic, cottages and villas and the inevitable *digue de mer* have sprung up on the dunes near the sea, and not very far from the original village. The chief feature of the new La Panne is that the houses are, except those on the sea-front, built on the natural levels of the ground, some perched on the tops of the dunes, and others in the hollows which separate them. The effect is extremely picturesque, and the example of the builders of La Panne is being followed at other places, notably at Duinbergen, one of the very latest bathing stations, which has risen during the last three years about a mile to the east of Heyst.

Another very interesting place is the Plage de Westende, the present terminus of the electric railway from Ostend. The old village of Westende lies a mile inland on the highway between Nieuport

and Ostend, close to the scene of the Battle of the Dunes. This Plage is, indeed, a model seaside resort, with a *digue* which looks down upon a shore of the finest sand, and from which, of an evening, one sees the lights of Ostend in the east, and the revolving beacon at Dunkirk shining far away to the west. The houses which front the sea, all different from each other, are in singularly good taste ; and behind them are a number of detached cottages and villas, large and small, in every variety of design. Ten years ago the site of this little town was a rabbit warren ; now everything is up to date : electric light in every house, perfect drainage, a good water-supply, tennis courts, and an admirable hotel, where even the passing stranger feels at home. Though only three-quarters of an hour from noisy, crowded, bustling Ostend by the railway, it is one of the quietest and most comfortable places on the coast of Flanders, and can be reached by travellers from England in a few hours.

Some years hence the lovely, peaceful Plage de Westende may have grown too big, but when the sand has all been turned into gold, and when the contractors and builders have grown rich, those who have known Westende in its earlier days will think of it as the quiet spot about which at one

time only a few people used to stroll; where perhaps the poet Verhaeren found something to inspire him; where many a long summer's evening was spent in pleasant talk on history, and painting, and music by a little society of men and women who spoke French, or German, or English, as the fancy took them, and laughed, and quoted, and exchanged ideas on every subject under the sun; where the professor of music once argued, and sprang up to prove his point by playing—but that is an allusion, or, as Mr. Kipling would say, 'another story.'

The district in which Westende lies, with Lombaerdzyde, Nieuport, Furnes, and Coxyde close together, is the most interesting on the coast of Flanders. Le Coq, on the other hand, is in that part of the dune country which has least historical interest, and is chiefly known as the place where the Royal Golf Club de Belgique has its course. It is only twenty minutes from Ostend on the Vicinal railway, which has a special station for golfers near the Club House. There is no *digue*, and the houses are dotted about in a valley behind the dunes. This place has a curious resemblance to a Swiss village.

A few years ago the owners of lands upon the Flemish littoral began to grasp the fact that there

was a sport called golf, on which Englishmen were in the habit of spending money, and that it would be an addition to the attractions of Ostend if, beside the racecourse, there was a golf-course. King Leopold, who is said to contemplate using all the land between the outskirts of Ostend and Le Coq for sporting purposes, paid a large sum, very many thousands of francs, out of his own pocket, and the golf-links at Le Coq were laid out. The Club House is handsome and commodious, but, unfortunately, the course itself, which is the main thing, is not very satisfactory, being far too artificial. The natural 'bunkers' were filled up, and replaced by ramparts and ditches like those on some inland courses in England. On the putting greens the natural undulations of the ground have been levelled, and the greens are all as flat and smooth as billiard-tables. There are clumps of ornamental wood, flower-beds, and artificial ponds with goldfish swimming in them. It is all very pretty, but it is hardly golf. What with the 'Grand Prix d'Ostende,' the 'Prix des Roses,' the 'Prix des Ombrelles, handicap libre, réservé aux Dames,' the 'Grand Prix des Dames,' and a number of other *objets d'art*, which are offered for competition on almost every day from the be-

ginning of June to the end of September, this is a perfect paradise for the pot-hunter and his familiar friend Colonel Bogey. Real golf, the strenuous game, which demands patience and steady nerves, perhaps, more than any other outdoor game, is not yet quite understood by many Belgians; but the bag of clubs is every year becoming more common on the Dover mail-boats.

Most of these golf-bags find their way to Knocke, where many of the English colony at Bruges spend the summer, and which, as the coast of Flanders becomes better known, is visited every year by increasing numbers of travellers from the other side of the Channel. Knocke is in itself one of the least attractive places on the Flemish littoral. The old village, a nondescript collection of houses, lies on the Vicinal railway about a mile from the sea, which is reached by a straight roadway, and where there is a *digue*, numerous hotels, pensions, and villas, all of which are filled to overflowing in the season. The air, indeed, is perfect, and there are fine views from the *digue* and the dunes of the island of Walcheren, Flushing, and the estuary of the Scheldt; but the place was evidently begun with no definite plan: the dunes were ruthlessly levelled, and the result is a few unlovely streets,

and a number of detached houses standing in disorder amidst surroundings from which everything that was picturesque has long since departed.

But the dunes to the east are wide, and enclose a large space of undulating ground; and here the Bruges Golf and Sports Club has its links, which present a very complete contrast to the Belgian course at Le Coq. The links at Knocke, if somewhat rough and ready, are certainly sporting in the highest degree. Some of the holes, those in what is known as the Green Valley, are rather featureless; but in the other parts of the course there are numerous natural hazards, bunkers, and hillocks thick with sand and rushes. It has no pretentions to be a 'first-class' course (for one thing, it is too short), but in laying out the eighteen holes the ground has been utilized to the best advantage, and the Royal and Ancient game flourishes more at Knocke than at any other place in Belgium. The owners of the soil and the hotel-keepers, with a keen eye to business, and knowing that the golfing alone brings the English, from whom they reap a golden harvest, to Knocke, do all in their power to encourage the game, and it is quite possible that before long other links may be established along the coast. The soil of the strip behind

the dunes is not so suitable for golf as the close turf of St. Andrews, North Berwick, or Prestwick, for in many places it consists of sand with a slight covering of moss; but with proper treatment it could probably be improved and hardened. It is merely a question of money, and money will certainly be forthcoming if the Government, the communes, and the private owners once see that this form of amusement will add to the popularity of the littoral.

A short mile's walk to the west of Knocke brings us to Duinbergen, one of the newest of the Flemish *plages*, founded in the year 1901 by the Société Anonyme de Duinbergen, a company in which some members of the Royal Family are said to hold shares. At Knocke and others of the older watering-places everything was sacrificed to the purpose of making money speedily out of every available square inch of sand, and the first thing done was to destroy the dunes. But at Duinbergen the good example set by the founders of La Panne has been followed and improved upon, and nothing could be more *chic* than this charming little place, which was planned by Herr Stübben, of Cologne, an architect often employed by the King of the Belgians, whose idea was to create a small garden

city among the dunes. The dunes have been carefully preserved ; the roads and pathways wind round them ; most of the villas and cottages have been erected in places from which a view of the sea can be obtained ; and even the *digue* has been built in a curve in order to avoid the straight line, which is apt to give an air of monotony to the rows of villas, however picturesque they may be in themselves, which face the sea at other places. So artistic is the appearance of the houses that the term 'Style Duinbergen' is used by architects to describe it. Electric lighting, a copious supply of water rising by gravitation to the highest houses, and a complete system of drainage, add to the luxuries and comforts of this *plage*, which is one of the best illustrations of the wonders which have been wrought among the dunes by that spirit of enterprise which has done so much for modern Flanders during the last few years.

COXYDE—THE SCENERY OF THE DUNES

CHAPTER XI

COXYDE—THE SCENERY OF THE DUNES

The whole of the coast-line is within the province of West Flanders, and its development in recent years is the most striking fact in the modern history of the part of Belgium with which this volume deals. The change which has taken place on the littoral during the last fifteen or twenty years is extraordinary, and the contrast between the old Flanders and the new, between the Flanders which lingers in the past and the Flanders which marches with the times, is brought vividly before us by the difference between such mediæval towns as Bruges, Furnes, or Nieuport, and the bright new places which glitter on the sandy shores of the Flemish coast. But in almost every corner of the dunes, close to these signs of modern progress, there is something to remind us of that past history which is, after all, the great charm of Flanders.

One of the most characteristic spots in the land of the dunes is the village of Coxyde, which lies low amongst the sandhills, about five miles west from Nieuport, out of sight of the sea, but inhabited by a race of fisherfolk who, curiously enough, pursue their calling on horseback. Mounted on their little horses, and carrying baskets and nets fastened to long poles, they go into the sea to catch small fish and shrimps. It is strange to see them riding about in the water, sometimes in bands, but more frequently alone or in pairs; and this curious custom, which has been handed down from father to son for generations, is peculiar to the part of the coast which lies between La Panne and the borders of France.

Near Coxyde, and at the corner where the road from Furnes turns in the direction of La Panne, is a piece of waste ground which travellers on the Vicinal railway pass without notice. But here once stood the famous Abbey of the Dunes.

In the first years of the twelfth century a pious hermit named Lyger took up his abode in these solitary regions, built a dwelling for himself, and settled down to spend his life in doing good works and in the practice of religion. Soon, as others

COXYDE

A Shrimper on Horseback.



gathered round him, his dwelling grew into a monastery, and at last, in the year 1122, the Abbey of the Dunes was founded. It was nearly half a century before the great building, which is said to have been the first structure of such a size built of brick in Flanders, was completed; but when at last the work was done the Abbey was, by all accounts, one of the most magnificent religious houses in Flanders, consisting of a group of buildings with no less than 105 windows, a rich and splendid church, so famous for its ornamental woodwork that the carvings of the stalls were reproduced in the distant Abbey of Melrose in Scotland, and a library which, as time went on, became a storehouse of precious manuscripts and hundreds of those wonderfully illustrated missals on which the monks of the Middle Ages spent so many laborious hours. We can imagine them in the cells of Coxyde copying and copying for hours together, or bending over the exquisitely coloured drawings which are still preserved in the museums of Flanders.

But their most useful work was done on the lands which lay round the Abbey. There were at Coxyde in the thirteenth century no fewer than 150 monks and 248 converts engaged at one time

in cultivating the soil.* They drained the marshes, and planted seeds where seeds would grow, until, after years of hard labour on the barren ground, the Abbey of the Dunes was surrounded by wide fields which had been reclaimed and turned into a fertile oasis in the midst of that savage and inhospitable desert.

When St. Bernard was preaching the Crusade in Flanders he came to Coxyde. On his advice the monks adopted the Order of the Cistercians, and their first abbot under the new rule afterwards sat in the chair of St. Bernard himself as Abbot of Clairvaux. Thereafter the Cistercian Abbey of the Dunes grew in fame, especially under the rule of St. Idesbaldus, who had come there from Furnes, where he had been a Canon of the Church of Ste. Walburge. 'It has also a special interest for English folk. It long held lands in the isle of Sheppey, as well as the advowson of the church of Eastchurch, in the same island. These were bestowed on it by Richard the Lion-Hearted. The legend says that these gifts were made to reward its sixth abbot, Elias, for the help he gave in releasing Richard from captivity. Anyhow, Royal

* Derode, *Histoire Religieuse de la Flandre Maritime*, p. 86.

COXYDE

A Shrimper.



charters, and dues from the Archbishop of Canterbury, and a Bull of Pope Celestine III., confirmed the Abbey in its English possessions and privileges. The Abbey seems to have derived little benefit from these, and finally, by decision of a general congregation of the Cistercian Order, handed them over to the Abbot and Chapter of Bexley, to recoup the latter for the cost of entertaining monks of the Order going abroad, or returning from the Continent, on business of the Order.'*

The English invasion of the fifteenth century destroyed the work of the monks in their fields and gardens, but the Abbey itself was spared; and the great disaster did not come until a century later, when the image-breakers, who had begun their work amongst the Gothic arches of Antwerp, spread over West Flanders, and descended upon Coxyde. The Abbey was attacked, and the monks fled to Bruges, carrying with them many of their treasures, which are still to be seen in the collection on the Quai de la Poterie, beyond the bridge which is called the Pont des Dunes. The noble building, so long the home of so much piety and learning, and from which so many generations of apostles had gone forth to toil in the fields and

* Robinson, *Bruges, an Historical Sketch*, p. 176.

minister to the poor, was abandoned, and allowed to fall into ruins, until at last it gradually sunk into complete decay, and was buried beneath the sands. Not a trace of it now remains. History has few more piteous sermons to preach on the vanity of all the works of men.

The fishermen on the coast of Flanders have, from remote times, paid their vows in the hour of danger to Notre Dame de Lombaerdzyde. If they escape from some wild storm they go on a pilgrimage of thanksgiving. They walk in perfect silence along the road to the shrine, for not a word must be spoken till they reach it; and these hardy seafaring men may be seen kneeling at the altar of the old, weather-beaten church which stands on the south side of the highway through the village, and in which are wooden models of ships hung up as votive offerings before an image of the Virgin, which is the object of peculiar veneration. The Madonna of Lombaerdzyde did not prevail to keep the sea from invading the village at the time when the inhabitants were driven to Nieuport, but the belief in her miraculous power is as strong to-day as it was in the Dark Ages.

There is a view of Lombaerdzyde which no one strolling on the dunes near Nieuport should fail to



ADINKERQUE

Village and Canal.



see—a perfect picture, as typical of the scenery in these parts as any landscape chosen by Hobbema or Ruysdael. A causeway running straight between two lofty dunes of bare sand, and bordered by stunted trees, forms a long vista at the end of which Lombaerdzyde appears—a group of red-roofed houses, with narrow gables and white walls, and in the middle the pointed spire of the church, beyond which the level plain of Flanders, dotted with other villages and churches and trees in formal rows, stretches away into the distance until it merges in the horizon. Adinkerque, a picturesque village beyond Furnes, is another place which calls to mind many a picture of the Flemish artists in the Musée of Antwerp and the Mauritshuis at The Hague; and the recesses of the dune country in which these places are hidden has a wonderful fascination about it—the irregular outlines of the dunes, some high and some low, sinking here into deep hollows of firm sand, and rising there into strange fantastic shapes, sometimes with sides like small precipices on which nothing can grow, and sometimes sloping gently downwards and covered with trembling poplars, spread in confusion on every side. Often near the shore the sandy barrier has been broken down by the wind or by the

waves, and a long gulley formed, which cuts deep into the dunes, and through which the sand drifts inland till it reaches a steep bank clothed with rushes, against which it heaps itself, and so, rising higher with the storms of each winter, forms another dune. This process has been going on for ages. The sands are for ever shifting, but moss begins to grow in sheltered spots; such wild flowers as can flourish there bloom and decay; the poplars shed their leaves, and nourish by imperceptible degrees the fibres of the moss; some hardy grasses take root; and at length a scanty greensward appears. By such means slowly, in the microcosm of the dunes, have been evolved out of the changing sands places fit for men to live in, until now along the strip which guards the coast of Flanders there are green glades gay with flowers, and shady dells, and gardens sheltered from the wind, plots of pasture-land, cottages and churches which seem to grow out of the landscape, their colouring so harmonizes with the colouring which surrounds them. And ever, close at hand, the sea is rolling in and falling on the shore. 'Come unto these yellow sands,' and when the sun is going down, casting a long bar of burnished gold across the water, against which, perhaps, the sail of some boat

looms dark for a moment and then passes on, the sky glows in such a lovely, tender light that those who watch it must needs linger till the twilight is fading away before they turn their faces inland. There are few evenings for beauty like a summer evening on the shores of Flanders.

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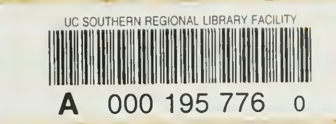
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